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ABOUT DECENTERED INDIVIDUALS ON SCREEN:
AN ANALYSIS OF AMERICAN FANTASY FILMS

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As in so many other areas of American society, the political legacy of Ronald Reagan had an imposing presence in many contemporary American films, particularly between 1980 and 2000. Six films, which collectively represent the spectrum of Reaganism's most popular tropes, demonstrate quite compellingly that in celebrating nostalgically the blissful pleasantries of family stability and social order so essential to Reagan's political philosophy, an unsettling and unsatisfying mythology has been created about a period in which many Americans were acutely aware that something was missing, even if they could not pinpoint it at the time. This leads the critical viewer to largely unacknowledged subtexts in all six films that begin to reveal the contradictions, incoherencies, and paradoxes rooted in popular Reaganesque portrayals.

Utilising a detailed qualitative case study methodology, this thesis incorporates theoretical foundations that expand upon Fairclough's path-breaking research on media discourse and Todorov's broadly articulated framework of fantasy in order to explore: 1) Which elements of Fairclough's framework for critical discourse analysis can be applied to explore the discursive structures within these American fantasy films? 2) In how far do the films follow Reaganist concepts of a 'new' American society? 3) In how far do notions of the 'fantastic' and postmodern concepts break with common patterns of Reaganism reflected in these films? While many critics rightly cite the numerous elements in these films that appear to reinforce fundamental message points underlying Reaganism, this study demonstrates how the films' characters and plot lines also serve to reveal the inherent and irreconcilable incoherence of the sociopolitical and sociocultural tenets of Reaganism.

Key Words: American films, fantasy, Reaganism, capitalism, decentered identity, historical memory

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Introduction

Even more than 30 years since Ronald Reagan delivered his 'New Beginning' speech[1] when he accepted the Republican party's presidential nomination, the near-mythic devotion to this man remains. In 2008, nearly every presidential candidate from Reagan's political party invoked his legacy as well as his claim as heir apparent to that legacy. Among the more recent Tea Party Movement[2] activists, deeply concerned that Reagan's conservative legacy could be washed away during the Obama presidency, T-shirts and bumper stickers carry slogans underscoring the near-deification of the man: 'What Would Reagan Do?'

An enormously popular political figure in life and after his death in 2004, Reagan used his 1980 acceptance speech to outline several themes, particularly the failure of his opponent (Jimmy Carter) and the government to protect American citizens from the effects of an 'indigestible economic stew' that 'has turned the national stomach' (Reagan, 1980, online). In the middle of the speech, Reagan leveled his strongest indictment against the government and what he saw as its assault on free enterprise.[3] In 2010, the arguments about government's role and functions in one of the deepest economic recessions along with the longest wars of engagement in U.S. history (Iraq and Afghanistan) have already changed. The selective historical memory of many political leaders has also fueled the conservative embrace of Reaganism to endorse the status quo of traditional family values as they are ensconced in a Judeo-Christian framework.

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[1] See Reagan (1980, online).

[2] An American socio-political protest movement that emerged in 2009 in response to several Federal laws initiated by the Obama presidency: the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, and Obama's attempt to reform the health care system. 'Tea Party Patriots' claim to be a 'community committed to standing together…to protect our country and the Constitution upon which we were founded!' [online] Available at: http://teapartypatriots.ning.com/ [Accessed 17 April 2011].

[3] 'The head of a government which has utterly refused to live within its means and which has, in the last few days, told us that this year's deficit will be $60 billion, dare to point the finger of blame at business and labor, both of which have been engaged in a losing struggle just trying to stay even. High taxes, we are told, are somehow good for us, as if, when government spends our money it isn't inflationary, but when we spend it, it is' (Reagan, 1980: online).

However, for every acolyte or Reagan loyalist who has taken the man for granted in portraying the president in as positive light as possible, there are those who, for the last three decades, have demonised and vilified the man as the chief representative of all the social, political, and cultural ills that plague contemporary society. Yet, both adherents and critics share a misunderstanding that not only points to how Reagan's reality has been conveniently simplified to exalt the man in the broadest of hero worship, but also to comprehending why the United States of America remains so profoundly shaped by his historical presence.

This is where American fantasy films—especially when they are taken from a particular era—can provide a broadly accessible platform for trying to make sense of just how these tropes shape and function in the exercise of historical memory. These films lend themselves well to the analysis because they work 'as ways of representing aspects of the world—the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the "mental world" of thoughts, feelings, beliefs… and the social world' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 124). As examples of contemporary fantastic narrative, they form part of a 'decentered discourse of subject' (Bessière, 1974, p. 73) and reflect Foucault's (1969, p. xviii) notion of 'heterotopia,' in which 'different spaces can come in contact with other spaces that seem to bear no relation to them.' As a result, the characters in these films begin to wonder 'which world they are in,' the 'real' or an 'imaginary,' fantastic world (Danaher, Schirato and Webb, 2000, p. 13). And, just as the myth of the Reagan legacy has taken form in the electoral and governing discourse of the nation, the real and the imaginary in these films can become equally blurred.

In fact, fantasy is 'anti-rational' in the way it often attacks, challenges, and contradicts contemporary constructs of reason. Fantasy creates an illusion of reality—an illusion that is readily apparent in the medium of films—and particularly evident in fantasy films. There is always a distinct tension between the 'real' and the 'unreal,' and this tension—much as that experienced by participants and spectators in the ongoing public discourse of American politics—is felt and experienced both by the characters in the film and we the viewers. This leads us, as critical viewers, to largely unacknowledged subtexts that are deeply embedded in all six films and begin to reveal the irreconcilable contradictions, incoherencies, and paradoxes rooted in

their capitalist and Reaganesque portrayals, and that is the ultimate purpose and goal of my research and the film case studies that follow.

In this context, the key research questions are: 1) Which elements of Fairclough's framework for critical discourse analysis can be applied to explore the discursive structures within these American fantasy films? 2) How far do the films follow Reaganesque concepts of a 'new' American society? 3) How far do notions of the 'fantastic' and postmodern concepts break with common patterns of Reaganism reflected in these films? The six films I have selected for analysis—*Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, 1985), *Pleasantville* (Ross, 1998), *Peggy Sue Got Married* (Coppola, 1986), *Big* (Marshall. P., 1988), *The Family Man* (Ratner, 2000), and *The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998)—share several characteristics particularly suited to studying cinema against a landscape of Reaganism, and they allow us to both look back to understand the past, as well as forward to understand the current American political climate. In various ways, each film represents the comprehensive continuum of tension and conflict involved in the redemption of the weak father figure, echoing the sociopolitical and socioeconomic tones of the Reagan administration's campaign of restoring and repositioning America's heroic, strong role in the economy and arena of international relations as the unquestioned leader at home and abroad.

More significantly, these films—not only in content but also in their titles— represent the most popular tropes, especially those often enthusiastically embraced by the controversial president in his formal speeches, as well as those that eventually came to be regarded as the most pejorative representations of the Reagan administration. However, the films—when viewed as a total package—demonstrate quite compellingly, as with those trying to protect and enhance the Reagan legacy, that in celebrating nostalgically the blissful pleasantries of family stability and social order, an unsettling and unsatisfying mythology has instead been created about a period in which many Americans were acutely aware that something was missing, even if they could not pinpoint it at the time.

To help track how dynamic tropes, both positive and negative, emerged to shape and challenge the legacy-building ritual that started during the 1980s and continues to this day, three of the films I have chosen were made during the climatic years of the Reagan presidency, and the other three were made within 12 years after

Reagan's retirement in 1989. Collins, J. (1993, p. 255) claims that films such as *Back to the Future*, *Pleasantville*, and others belong to a genre he calls 'new sincerity' because of the way in which they reconfigure cultural references. Indeed, the journeys undertaken by the protagonists in these fantasy films tend to reflect a simple binary formulation that was reinvigorated during the Reagan era, sustained through the 1990s, and vigorously challenged in the 2000s: One is the positive American-centric portfolio of technological prowess, economic prosperity, and moral-social integrity, while the other is the fragmented, weak, disorganised structure, depleted of its benevolent, virile, patriarchal figures. In this context, I explore the 'semantic engineering,' as Fairclough (1995a) would suggest, which is essential to promoting the aspects of capitalism and community order desired by those with hegemonic power.

This 'official' discourse also includes racial perspectives, which gain unprecedented currency within the context of Obama's presidency, and have simultaneously invigorated the efforts of the most aggressive promoters and sharpest critics of the Reagan legacy enterprise. However, in this study I argue further that while the protagonists, as part of their journeys, tidy up the messiness of the past and try to preserve the fantastical myth of stability and social order, we must acknowledge that, like the protagonists in these films, they (just like us, the viewers) can never completely shake free of the uncontrollable, divergent events that inevitably unmask the flimsiness of this imaginary, capitalist structure.

There is clear evidence the critical potential of the filmic subtexts is largely based on the characteristics of the 'fantastic' elements that break with the capitalist perspectives portrayed, and helps to reveal such 'hidden' aspects of ideology 'that underpin social interaction' (Bloor and Bloor, 2007, p. 27). These subtexts open up the narrative framework of choices, giving the protagonists ways of re-imagining or re-inventing their roles, leveraging ideological possibilities, and finding diverse, compelling ways to make the precepts and notions of Reaganism and contemporary corporate and social norms accessible and flexible according to their own life stories and desires. The fantastic heroics of these protagonists, therefore, can be contemplated and envisioned in their own individual renditions.

To set the stage for the individual film analyses, chapters one and two comprise a review of some key concepts of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and the fantasy genre, which will help to further explore cinematic reflections of Reaganism. In chapter one, I explore ideology as an important aspect of CDA because it is directly related to power relations. I draw on Wodak (2001a) who believes that it is dominance that structures discourse, and how attempts to resist the effects of power and ideology result in breaking conventional, discursive practices. I examine Fairclough (1989-2003) and Kress (1990) in terms of how these acts of resistance against dominant ideologies are acts of 'creativity,' as exemplified even in popularised, mainstream films. Films are also discussed as multi-semiotic artifacts that reflect sociocultural processes, relations, and change, as well as social spaces with two simultaneously occurring social processes: 'cognition and representation of the world, and social interaction' (Fairclough, 1995a, p. 41).

In this context, I also address the potential shortcoming of any film analysis: the tendency to be reductive to the extent that a single or small cluster of implied themes becomes the de facto universal structure upon which all potential film narratives are distilled. We must therefore be alert to the political and historical contradictions that necessitate additional and previously hidden interpretations that are enriched in cultural, socioeconomic, and ethnic themes. It becomes instructive, then, to dissect a film not merely from a hermeneutics emphasis, but also from a problem-solving perspective that delves directly into historical questions of capitalism, nationalism, race, ethnicity, and masculinity as it relates to fatherhood and family leadership, and how these questions (and ongoing discussions related to them) overlap and affect each other.

In chapter two, I explore the genre of the fantastic and the fantasy film, relying primarily on Todorov's (1975) definition of the fantastic because it most accurately describes the 'hesitation' and 'disbelief' that is so clearly exhibited by the main characters in the films I have chosen and shared with the viewer. In addition, I draw on Jackson, R. (1981), Bloor and Bloor (2007), and Bakhtin (1973) to investigate the ideological implications of the fantastic more in depth.

The six case studies of the films are then presented in separate chapters in which I examine each film as an example of a Hollywood fantasy blockbuster about individual choice facilitated, and at the same time, constrained by the collective

structures of contemporary U.S. capitalism. In this context, it becomes possible to investigate further the idealised presentations in the films, some of which have been produced with a considerable amount of slyness and subtlety, while others indicate alternatives but fail to elaborate them, i.e. the development of subtexts varies from film to film quite considerably. For example, *Back to the Future*, released in 1985, emerges prominently in Reagan's 1986 State of the Union Address, just days after the tragic Challenger space shuttle accident. Directly addressing the 'younger generation,' the president said: 'With all the temptations young people face it sometimes seems the allure of the permissive society requires superhuman feats of self control' (Reagan 1986a, online). He continued: 'As they said in the film, *Back to the Future*, "Where we are going, we don't need roads"' (ibid.).

It is important to acknowledge the sustaining power of the subtexts generated by those managing to weave a hypnotising false history that idolised the imaginary political wonders of a presidential figure who still compels so many to ignore other considerations in society. What made the Reagan mythology possible at all is that he backtracked on almost every major political promise because doing otherwise would have exposed completely the shortcomings of his original intentions.

Even more than *Back to the Future*, *Pleasantville*, released in 1998—a time when the Reagan legacy was being further cemented with a flood of books that warmly remembered his presidency—appears to reconstruct the American Dream via its nostalgic look backwards. However, like the *Peyton Place* (Metalious, 1956, 2002) novel that set off a firestorm in the 1950s, *Pleasantville* sheds light on the same iconic social constructs that the book sets out to reveal, as well as the ways communities resisted these revelations. Despite desperate attempts to leave intact what was imagined 'innocent' and 'pleasant,' the marginalised elements bubble uncomfortably close to the surface. In particular, *Pleasantville*, where colour is a prominent part of the *mise-en-scène*, allows the comparison of the blandness of suburban life with 'otherness,' because beneath the façade of imagined normalcy, the pretense of denial and detachment feeds an evil that eventually unleashes chaos with tragic consequences or, to varying degrees, personal development and dissatisfaction at home, school, the workplace, and social venues.

In *Peggy Sue Got Married*, released in 1986, the distinct 'pro-family' trope reasserting marriage as a worthy institution gets a neat cinematic treatment. The film, made during Reagan's second term, reflects the president's championing of 'new patriotism,' as well as the reactionary backlash against women's rights causes and the appropriation of sexual expression only within the contexts of marriage and procreation. However, the protagonist's marriage still ends up less than perfect, and the fact that independent relationship alternatives are available suggest that even a conservative's approach to social issues might be far more nuanced than what the mythologised Reagan storyline suggests.

Very similarly, *Big*, released in 1988 during the final months of Reagan's presidency, draws first and predominantly on the conservative social rhetoric that a woman's place is in the home where she can fulfill her 'natural' role as homemaker and caregiver, as frequently highlighted in the official discourse of Reagan's presidency. In *Big*, there is a subtle slight-of-hand diluting the pro-Reagan *Back to the Future* trope with a satirical take on the yuppie ethos of take-no-prisoners greed and the obsession with work and Machiavellian office politics in order to advance on the corporate ladder, even at the expense of family cohesion.

While *Pleasantville*, employing the metaphors of colour, echoes the critique of Reagan as aggravating the nation's racial divide in economic and social policy, *The Family Man*, a film released in 2000—12 years after the end of Reagan's two terms in office—reinforces the fantasy of the white man's redemption being sustained through an imagined ritual atonement in the figure of a black angel. And like *Peggy Sue Got Married*, it reinforces the importance of choosing marriage and family over work and economic greed. However, as the story originates in 1987 and moves 13 years ahead, *The Family Man* also offers us the nuances of independent options that suggest the social quest for happiness can be conducted at a distance from economic considerations.

Finally, *The Truman Show*, released in 1998, completes the treatment of Reagan, a former Hollywood actor, as a presidential movie star. More than ten years before the film was released, political critics frequently called Reagan's presidency 'The Truman Show,' particularly because the Republican president consistently misappropriated the legacies of Harry Truman and other Democratic presidents from earlier periods. Following the other five films I analyse, *The Truman Show* brings

full circle the implications of the blur between reality and the imagined world, constructed specifically for the protagonist hero. Unaware of the massive media monster that is constructed around him, in which everyone else is an actor, Truman (Jim Carrey) is spontaneous, charming, and funny—just as Reagan appeared regularly in his public appearances and press briefings.

In aggregate, the films chosen for this study illuminate that improving as a national community requires us to acknowledge it as an important initial step, but we also need to proceed fully aware of historical considerations that are unencumbered by the politically manipulated and engineered motivations of those who prefer to ignore the failed intentions of their imaginary heroes. With Reagan, the nation settled comfortably into the habit of hearing feel-good speeches which cast leaders as likeable, homespun Americans, and which avoided confronting directly the nation's most serious and pervasive problems. The acolytes of Reaganism, for good and bad, have consolidated a civic tradition where anything above and beyond the national status quo becomes an unrealistic expectation that could never possibly happen.

Bunch (2010, online), for example, hones in on contemporary conservatives who have erroneously hijacked the Reagan legacy—for their own political gain— taking undue advantage of an ubiquitous digital media environment that was not present during Reagan's administration.[4] Bunch acknowledges that Reagan would be positioned well to the left of today's Republican party on such issues as whether or not torture was permissible. Similarly, he highlights the high risks involved in the selective editing of the Reagan legacy.[5] The question then is if we can change the

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[4] According to Bunch (2010, online): 'The power of liberalism was still strong in the land, and so Reagan, like Nixon before him, operated in an environment of relative rationality and sanity that we can scarcely even imagine today. It was no golden age by any means, but at least there was some sense of brass tacks. Rightwing think tanks were growing rapidly, but not yet totally dominant, Rush Limbaugh's name was utterly unknown. Fox News would not be launched for a decade. It was a different world. And that's the world in which John McCain first won his seat in the Senate, when Barry Goldwater retired.'

[5] Bunch (2010, online) states: 'It's almost tragic—when you go back to the very recent history of the 1980s—when you realize how seriously an American consensus on human rights and the power of our criminal justice system has been trashed by the modern conservative movement. It's going to take a long time to get that back— although the words that Reagan and his aides left behind could help America get past this.'

metric, take the risks, and transform the calculus of our discourse where we judge ourselves and our leaders on raising the individual and collective bars of our civic enlightenment, and designating anything less as a major disappointment.

We will now turn to Chapter 1, which discusses the various aspects of critical discourse analysis that can be applied effectively to the American fantasy films chosen for this study.

Chapter 1:
Applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to American Fantasy Films

1.1 Defining Discourse

Discourse can be viewed as a form of power-supportive 'knowledge,' as posited by Jäger (2001, pp. 32-34), who relies heavily on Foucault's theory of discourse in his discussion of 'what knowledge…consists of, how this valid knowledge evolves,' and 'how it is passed on.' For Jäger, knowledge, in how it directs and impacts society, encompasses human consciousness, which is what people use to make sense of the world. Individuals acquire knowledge discursively over the span of their lifetime, and CDA attempts to identify and critique knowledge in an effort to understand its context and its relationship to power. Jäger claims that knowledge 'flows' throughout society and time, becoming 'mutual knowledge' that is used in communicative acts. Shared knowledge is an important aspect of discourse because individuals need it to effectively communicate with one another. If someone assumes that an individual knows something when in fact she does not, a breakdown in communication can occur.[6]

In this study, I will view discourse as 'language in action' (Hanks, 1996), and language as 'meaningful symbolic behavior' (Blommaert, 2005, p. 2). In other words, language and discourse, as a human activity, is directly connected to social, cultural, and historical factors. More specifically, I will address discourse from a cultural/socio-political rather than from a linguistic perspective; a hybrid drawing upon key concepts linked to Foucault and Fairclough. Consider Foucault (1969), who saw the verbal 'statement' as the basic unit of discourse, and discourse as being shaped, confined, and acted upon by social institutions, such as prisons, schools, political groups, the professions, and other community institutions.

I concur with Foucault's notion that it is statements that make all utterances, speech acts, and propositions socially meaningful. But these statements are only

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[6] In the film *Big*, for example, communication is often hampered because Josh (Tom Hanks)—due to the fantastic situation in which he finds himself—does not or cannot share mutual knowledge with the other characters in the film. Thus, when he tells Susan (Elizabeth Perkins), 'I miss my family…and I want to go home,' she mistakenly thinks that Josh is married.

made meaningful by a network of social rules. That is, they depend on the conditions from which they emerge and exist within a discursive field. For example, the use of a politician's 'short quote' or 'sound bite' universally forms the basis for mass media punditry. In a tight orbit, the 'sound bite' suddenly springs forward into an extensive string of speculative commentary as imagined by political analysts.

In his preface to *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault (1973, p. xvi) wrote:

> Commentary questions discourse as to what it says and intended to say; it tries to uncover that deeper meaning of speech that enables it to achieve an identity with itself, supposedly nearer to its essential truth; in other words, in stating what has been said, one has to re-state what has never been said.

The phenomenon of 'never been said' has become particularly well suited to the mass media's need to produce, without interruption, content for the 24/7 news cycle. Despite the essential flaws of voicing speculation unfettered from any demand of contemplative reasoning or thought, the political commentary on air and so widely accessible online works quite well in the absence of any limits or common language with prescribed rules. Later, Foucault (ibid., p. xviii) offers a fresh option: 'Is it not possible to make a structural analysis of discourses that would evade the fate of commentary by supposing no remainder, nothing in excess of what has been said, but only the fact of its historical appearance?' The near-total obsession with 'sound bites' is less suggestive about their significance than about the way journalists and the mass media have turned political campaigns into larger narratives where strategies, not issues of substance, and the dissection of strategy play well in crafting those narratives.[7]

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[7] Writing for *The American Prospect*, Paul Waldman (2008, online) describes the media elite's proletarian pose that has become the standard of the medium for perpetuating the 'sound bite' political analysis: 'This Blue Collar Chic unites the allegedly neutral journalists and the conservative commentators, whether it's Peggy Noonan dismissing the "intellectuals, academics, local clever people who talk loudly in restaurants, and leftist mandarins," so distant from "a cultural energy and Bible study and garage bands and sports-love and mom-love and sophistication and normality," or Michael Barone harrumphing about "soft America," where those pathetic liberals sip merlot and listen to NPR, in contrast to "hard America," where the real folks do the real work. Reagan's mastery of the sound bite, thanks to his experience in Hollywood, played well in newsrooms [and] changed the substance of

As contemporary CDA has shown,[8] language, discourse, and thus texts are multi-semiotic—they include all forms of communication: written, spoken, and visual. Focusing on lexical and grammatical features within texts, Halliday and Hasan (1985) suggest that they depict and represent the social and natural world, construct and direct social relations, and develop commonly accepted conventions of identifiable appearance in particular media forms as coherent texts. And Kress (1993, p. 25) notes that written and spoken texts represent specific, selective views of the world and of 'subject positions,' and they lay out the social relations of 'reading positions.' These reading positions situate readers in their identifiable relations of power and agency relative to texts. Therefore, I see films—more specifically, American fantasy films—serving as multi-semiotic discourse texts that lend themselves well to Fairclough's approach to CDA.

Discourse is very much a social phenomenon: it defines us as human beings and forms the basis of societies. As Blommaert (2005, p. 4) rightly points out: 'there is no such thing as a "non-social" use of discourse, just as there is no such thing as a "non-cultural" or "non-historical" use of it.' And because discourse is a social phenomenon, it often becomes the site of conflict, struggle, and/or oppression, and it is essential in rendering every aspect of an individual's social, cultural, political, and educational environment meaningful. Therefore, films are very much social discourse texts: they are conceived of, produced, written, directed, and acted in by human beings with the purpose of conveying a story to an audience. In addition, they often depict social conflicts, struggles, and different forms of oppression, and they are often used to convey or promote social messages, such as the oppressive nature of racism. It is in their role of conveying messages and being consumed by an audience that they become socially discursive texts as well.

Oswick and Keenoy (2001, online) suggest that CDA leads to a 'deeper and more socially contextualized analysis' of dialogue, following up on Fairclough's (1985, 1992a) methodological application of CDA to conceptualising discourse as 'being simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice' (Oswick and Keenoy, 2001, online). The analysis of the films in this study, for example, proves particularly instructive in comprehending the

their political coverage by relying upon in-house pundits and experts who focused less on what elected officials said than how they said it.'

[8] See Blommaert (2005), Fairclough (1989, 1995a), and Wodak (2001a).

Reagan hagiography, especially in recognising that the Reaganesque rhetorical talks about freedom had little, if anything, to do with any analytically rigorous conceptualisation of freedom.

Concerning the discourses found in film, Oswick and Keenoy cited several elemental layers used to construct film discourses, including the entertainment industry's 'social practices' and most significantly, the social contexts of a film's location, which serves as 'an essential bedrock of imagery/reality in order to construct a convincing story/reality' (ibid.). Using Las Vegas in their specific analysis, Oswick and Keenoy state: 'As a macro-spectacle, Las Vegas represents a singular display of the problems which arise in attempting to distinguish meaningfully between "reality" and "fiction"' (ibid.). In their article, they 'provide an example of a discursive method to explore the interplay between "social relations" and "images" as critical facets of the realities and fictions which constitute the "Las Vegas Spectacle"' (ibid.). They examine social relations 'using the systematic application of critical discourse analysis and the specific images analyzed are Las Vegas films. An intrinsic feature of the various representations of Vegas is the notion of "compulsive consumption"' (ibid.). They also discuss the 'implications of the "Vegas phenomenon" (i.e., the centrality of spectacle, consumption, and the collapse of fiction and reality) for the study of organizations and processes of organizing' (ibid.). Likewise, each of the six films in this study contain numerous referential elements that constitute or suggest the same sort of stagecraft which branded the 'Reagan Spectacle' for the nation's voters.

As discourse texts, films work on multiple levels: linguistically, they are both written (screenplay and script) and spoken (the dialogue) discourse.[9] Indeed, the notion of films as multi-modal texts is central to the soundness of CDA methodology. Foucault's 'dossier,'[10] Kristeva's (1980, p. 66) contention of text constructed as a 'mosaic of quotations,' Barthes' (1973, p. 36) characterisation of the

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[9] Oswick and Keenoy (2001, online) would add the visual aspects of the geographic setting of the film as a central element to how the filmic texts work (e.g. the portrayal of Las Vegas).

[10] See Chrostowska's (2006, online) brief but concise explanation of Foucault's 'dossier.'

'infinite text,' and McHale's (1987) 'Chinese box worlds'[11] underscore the concept of intertextuality, which begins to hint at the character of postmodern texts for their irony, paradoxes, and parodies. Therefore, 'historiographic metafiction' is the crucible for distilling the strands of the intertextual politics of postmodern fictions.[12] Filmmakers can often justifiably take dramatic liberties in their narratives, especially if the arrogance, greed, and obsession with corporate capitalism or national exceptionalism is portrayed as essentially convincing in representing deeper truth-building awareness of the larger community.

Going further, the element of 'voice' in analysing discourse signifies, in part, the effects of power positions among individuals and societies.[13] In the process, the local voice is transformed, but not to the extent that it ceases to be recognisable as local. The term 'glocalisation'[14] has been used to capture this process of merging. However, this construction of glocalisation fails to recognise that this kind of globalisation is the deliberate, strategic embedding of certain local discourses into Western/capitalist models, and that the corporations (e.g. mass media multiplatform conglomerates) involved effect the transformation. Taken to a local level, a desire for similar coherence in discursive meaning necessitates the assumption that people employ models encompassing shared beliefs implicit in the discourse.[15]

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[11] McHale's (1987, p. 112) reference deals with 'nesting' or 'embedding' a narrative (from one ontology) in the narrative (of another ontology). Worlds are multiplied in a 'recursive structure.'

[12] According to Hutcheon (1988, p. 127): 'the overt intertextuality of historiographic metafiction serves as one of the textual signals of this postmodern realization.'

[13] Much has been written on the issue of voice. See Voloshinov (1973), Bakhtin (1981, 1986), Thibault (1989), Durcot (1996, 2009), and Roulet (1996).

[14] The term originated from Japanese business practices adopted in the 1980s and became popularised in English by Roland Robertson, a British sociologist, in the 1990s, and Canadian sociologists Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman in the 1990s, who often used the term to describe people who are actively involved in both local and larger range activities such as commerce, friendship, and kinship. In his book, *The World is Flat*, Friedman, T. (2005) claims that the Internet promotes glocalisation because, for example, it encourages creating websites in one's native language. Films as works of mass culture reflect and reshape the interconnected themes of power, global scale, and visibility, both in how they are resisted and embraced.

[15] Arguably, one would seek to persuade others communicating beliefs implicitly without actually asserting them, and with the diminished prospects that they will be challenged.

Therefore, voice is a central concern in CDA and films provide a highly accessible context for analysing different voices and ultimately the mental representations associated with them: the dialogue spoken by the actors, the covert or overt sociopolitical message being conveyed by the writer/s and director, and so on. There is a bittersweet contrast, for example, between the anxieties about control over the local and the ambivalence of the global emergence (i.e. the infusion of colour) in *Pleasantville*. In *The Truman Show*, the narrative stokes disturbing suspicions that the comfortable familiarity about the local is no more than a mirage. However, what still needs to be parsed and studied further is to what extent these bittersweet feelings, tentative hopes, and disturbing suspicions from these films influence and shape popular responses and concerns about the risks of an increasingly interconnected, interdependent world that simultaneously and paradoxically conceals and reveals real imbalances of political and economic power.

As for audiences, structural anthropologists such as Leach (1954, 1969) and Levi-Strauss (1978a, 1978b) have argued that it was not so much the immediate surface part of a story—kinds of characters, locations, etc.—that really comprised the act of communication in storytelling. Rather, it was the deeper, implicit structure that carried core ideas about agency, roles and social organisation, and so constituted the key part of the message. These writers saw this as the role of storytelling. Multinational corporate media may tell stories set in different settings and dealing with people that have slightly different values and looks, but the fundamental structural reasons for how they behave, for what they want and how they might attain it, will follow the same logic.

Bloor and Bloor (2007, p. 18), on the other hand, categorises mutual knowledge,[16] claiming that each of these categories contributes to the formation of identity, power, and ideology; therefore, they must be kept in mind when conducting CDA. We must remember that shared/mutual knowledge is woven into the fabric of

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[16] For Bloor and Bloor (2007, p. 18), these categories consist of the following: knowledge of certain facts relating to subject matter; wide cultural knowledge, ranging from an understanding of major celebratory festivals, religious and/or ethical customs, to the legal system; knowledge of how people behave with respect to their social roles within social hierarchies; knowledge of institutional practices of specialist discourse communities; knowledge of the moral values of groups; knowledge of the co-text and context in a specific communicative event; and knowledge of individuals involved as discourse participants in the immediate communicative event.

cultural practice, so the critical discourse analyst should be prepared to investigate this knowledge and the assumptions that result in discursive constructs that, at various times, take on individually or collectively social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions. With Reagan, his most ardent supporters have aggressively policed how their political hero should be eulogised and remembered, ensuring that politically correct descriptions were neither patronising nor unpatriotic (e.g. either focusing on his sense of humour or genteel demeanor, or on criticising him for alienating large segments of the American population).

Films can also serve as embodiments of socially shared knowledge, and most practitioners of CDA believe that discourse is the site of ideology, but they cannot agree on a consensus definition for operational purposes in research. With regard to Reaganism, while the most intensely felt criticisms and accusations leveled against the president during his time in office have subsided in terms of their potential fury and indignation, there remains good opportunities to debate his legacy, especially as the current generation seeks to confront the issues that his philosophy have been indirectly, at the very least, responsible for keeping in play. An ideological example that is much discussed in CDA, and is a major focus of this study, is capitalism because of its widespread influence on Western society. Indeed, capitalistic ideology is a powerful discursive force that shapes many discourse texts, including the films I have chosen—particularly *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *The Truman Show*, *The Family Man*, and even, to some extent, *Big*.

Ideology is an important aspect of CDA because it is directly related to power relationships. Wodak (2001a, p. 3), for example, sees discourse as being 'structured by dominance.' That is, historically, dominance has been ideologically legitimised by those groups with power.[17] Thus, CDA often tries to analyse unequal power struggles in society and how they can be challenged. The effects of power and

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[17] Fairclough (1989, p. 71) believes that people can be positioned within different competing ideologies. These are not really ideological struggles but hegemonic (power) struggles, where orders of possible discourses and the actual discourses produced by the texts matters. In other words, the power struggle brings all the dimensions together: social practice, discourse, and text. In media discourse, 'ideologies are brought to discourse not as explicit elements of a text, but as background assumptions.' For Fairclough, the 'central point here is the fact that the text does not foreground ideologies as they will then cease to be common sense and thereby lose their capacity to function ideologically. The producers will present a topic and through cues let the interpreter bring the ideologies to the interpretation.'

ideology are often 'taken as a given,' and any attempt to resist is seen as 'the breaking of conventions, of stable discursive practices' (ibid.). For Fairclough and Kress (1993, p. 4ff), these acts of resistance against dominant ideologies are acts of 'creativity,' an idea that becomes apparent, for example, when Truman attempts to escape Seahaven, or when Josh has to navigate the adult world of work and romance.

For some, such as Blommaert (2005, pp. 150-158), ideology is 'a specific set of symbolic representations—discourse, terms, arguments, images, stereotypes—serving a specific purpose, and operated by specific groups or actors, recognisable precisely by their usage of such ideologies.' Others, such as Eagleton (1991) and Thompson (1984), view ideology in more general terms in that it reflects particular social and political systems, and it both affects and is perpetuated by everyone within a particular system. In short, ideologies take many discursive forms and orders: capitalism, communism, fascism, and liberalism, for example. They can also represent different political positions along a broad, diverse continuum from 'conservative' to 'revolutionary.' No matter what form they take, I agree with Blommaert's (2005, p. 159) fundamental claim that ideologies 'characterize actors who adhere to them.' They are codified and supported by different 'basic' texts and have clear, historical origins.

Conversely, ideology can also be seen as a cultural manifestation of different social and political systems. These are conceived of as grand narratives, a view often attributed to the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971). Here, Blommaert (2005, p. 159) sees ideology penetrating 'the whole fabric of societies or communities,' producing 'nominalized, naturalized patterns of thought and behavior.'[18] Ideology's distinguishing trait refers to the subject matter of the discourse (i.e., social, economic, power relations, political), but those can become blurred in creative artistic and aesthetic forms. For example, Soviet Realism—art that glorified the roles of the working poor—shows how aesthetic and artistic expression is nearly absorbed completely into an ideological framework. Likewise, action stories, such as the

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[18] A good example is found in many conservative-friendly suburban communities which impose unnecessary restrictions on land use, pass petty ordinances about when residents may use park or waterfront spaces, and focus on centrally planned agendas to secure communities for particular demographic groups of residents. Also see Lyotard (1987) and Stevens (1998).

series of four *Rambo* films,[19] can be interpreted ideologically for how they represent aspects of Western liberal democracies fighting against Soviet-style imperialism.

Ideology operates as a system of thought with distinguishing content that is capable of explaining or accounting for as much of the larger world as it can. Furthermore, it permits the writer (and/or filmmaker) to quash those contradictions that arise in circumstances where the ideological system cannot explain them. Therefore, ideology is a useful complement to the large, systemic patterns of dominance and power. However, more significantly, we rely on the functions of ideology to deal directly with the contradictions that pop up frequently and negotiate them in our world experiences. Specifically, we can examine films to see how ideology enables, for example, various characters to continue acting in a manner consistent with ideological foundations they have previously adopted, even as they immediately face incontrovertible contradictions to those fundamentals.

It is quite evident that movies act as symbolic representations of discourses because they construct meaning, which is conveyed symbolically through the actor's words and actions.[20] Just as Eagleton (1994 in Wodak, 2001a, p. 10) believes that 'there are specific historical reasons why people come to feel, reason, desire and imagine as they do,' we can view films such as *Back to the Future*, *Pleasantville*, and *Peggy Sue Got Married* from a historical perspective in that they reflect, in various forms, American ideals that are particularly relevant to the 1950s and early 1960s.[21] And as we will see in the case studies that follow, their message is often implied or presupposed.

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[19] *First Blood* (Kotcheff, 1982); *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos, 1985); *Rambo III* (MacDonald, 1988); and *Rambo* (Lerner, 2008).

[20] We should keep in mind that the 'relations of participants in producing texts are not always equal: there will be a range from complete solidarity to complete inequality' (Dellinger, 1995, online). In addition, while meanings are generated through interactions, they are never arbitrary. History is accounted for as politically and ideologically inflected time. Therefore, when considering the precision of critical discourse analysis, the 'more precisely our linguistic components are examined, the more abstract and imprecise the old observations become…one can only be precise on one analytic level at a time, and then only for a moment' (Hall, E.T., 1959). As such, it might be worth considering Milton Bennett's (1993, p. 21) approach of 'an ethnocentric assumptive base,' in which it is assumed that the learner attaches false meanings to observable cultural differences in other individuals.'

[21] These will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

Pleasantville, for example, seems to reflect the simple virtues of family life in the 1950s, yet we can justifiably discern underlying ideological struggles encompassing race, sexual equality, censure, and the American ideal of 'the pursuit of happiness' and 'liberty and justice for all.' Even more modern films, such as *Big* and *The Family Man*, are potentially ideological in their message that greed and capitalism is bad if they occur at the expense of love and family. Using the six films I have chosen for this study, I will show how effectively ideology can be 'packaged' in movies, and how it is important to be aware of the implicit (or presupposed) 'messages' that so often lie just beneath the surface of the cinematic experience. *Back to the Future*, for example, conveys a pro-Reagan perspective that is not overtly apparent in the film, but very much there nonetheless.

1.2 Defining Text

When we talk about a 'text,' we are often referring to actual spoken, written, or visual data, whereas 'discourse' can be seen as the process of communication involving the production, application, and understanding of texts. In order to fully understand a text, we must also understand its context, its background information, or the knowledge being shared in communicative acts. In short, a text can be viewed as a 'product' of discourse—a type of 'record' of a communicative event.[22] Films can be regarded as multi-modal texts because they rely on more than one mode of communication with their audience. For example, the introduction of black music in *Pleasantville* marks a shift from conservative to more liberal thought and behaviour.

Crucial to analysing film texts is to understand the contexts in which they arise.[23] Gumperz (1982, 1992), who produced the seminal concept of 'contextualisation' to explain how people are able to 'make sense,' also recognised how contextualisation can cause problems in discursive interactions, especially in regards to power relationships, race, gender, or ethnicity. Communication breaks down when utterances in contexts are intentionally or unintentionally 'misplaced,' or

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[22] Beaugrande and Dressler (1981, p. 7) propose: '[A] text as a meaningful speech event will meet seven standards of textuality': cohesion, coherence, acceptability, intentionality, informativity, situationality or relevance, and intertextuality.

[23] For Blommaert (2005, pp. 39-40), this is because context 'addresses the way in which linguistic forms—"text"—become part of, get integrated in, or become constitutive of larger activities in the social world.'

when those with power distort contexts to manipulate others. As a result, we might only be able to understand something if we are able to make sense of the context in which it resides.

Films offer an infinite number of social contexts for communicative events, and while other text forms—such as novels and even poems—provide examples of social interactions, the American fantasy films I have selected for this study provide an interesting platform for analysis in the way that they work as 'social institutions' that, according to Fairclough (1995a, p. 38), are 'an apparatus of verbal interaction.' Each of the American fantasy films I have selected for this study represents what Fairclough terms a 'speech community' that has its own particular repertoire of speech events that are dictated by the films' settings, the identities and relationships between the characters, as well as their goals, conflicts, and desires.

1.3 Relevant Concerns of CDA

Critical discourse analysis is an extremely flexible way of approaching and thinking about any kind of text (spoken, written, visual—and thus films) that does not draw upon any one particular theory nor use or require quantitative research methods. In essence, CDA attempts to reveal the 'hidden' motivations behind texts and the methods used to interpret them. It is also used to expand discursive horizons. CDA is able to accomplish this through a deconstructive reading and interpretation of a given text based on the assumption that every text inscribes itself within a given discourse. In short, there is no single definition that can be given to CDA because it is an interdisciplinary approach to discourse analysis that takes many forms, such as discursive psychology,[24] conversational analysis,[25] and sociolinguistics.[26] In general, CDA can be defined as a 'set of methods and theories for investigating language use and language in social contexts' (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001, p. i). Concerning Reagan, my analysis shows that both the man's fiercest defenders and resolute detractors are missing an essential point that the worthwhile truths of the Reagan era actually fall somewhere in between these extreme dichotomies.

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[24] See Edwards (1997).
[25] See Potter and Wetherell (1987).
[26] See Labov (1969, 1972), regarded as the founder of sociolinguistics.

At its core, CDA attempts to analyse and reveal both the overt and covert 'structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak, 1995, p. 4). In other words, it looks at the effects power has on individuals, groups, and societies. Fairclough's landmark publication, *Language and Power* (1989), is considered by many to be the 'start' of CDA, and proponents of CDA view language as a 'social practice,' believing that 'discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned' (Blommaert, 2005, p. 25, with particular reference to Fairclough, N. Mulderigg, J. and Wodak, R. 1997). They support the view of Habermas (1977, p. 259) that 'language is also a medium of domination and social force' that 'serves to legitimize relations of organized power.'[27] For example, a well-to-do suburban homeowner in America will champion the rhetoric of freedom and universal property rights only until the day when a nearby landowner, coming from different circumstances and background, wants to build an apartment complex or any other structure on his own property, which threatens to disrupt the community status quo.

The social issues addressed by CDA range from the very big (macro issues) to the very small (micro issues), and because the methods used in CDA are many, we cannot conceive of a single, generally accepted analytical method in CDA, which has led to criticism. Not everyone agrees on the theoretical and methodological validity and effectiveness of CDA, and most criticism is aimed at both interpretation and context, with many charging that CDA is biased. One of CDA's biggest critics is Henry Widdowson (1995), who 'accused CDA of blurring important distinctions between concepts, disciplines, and methodologies' (Blommaert, 2005, p. 31). Widdowson claims that CDA contains too many 'vague' concepts and methods, relying on whichever social theory is popular at the time. In addition, he accuses CDA of being biased while pretending to be an objective form of analysis. Widdowson believes that CDA does not sufficiently take into account the multiple

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[27] This follows Bloor and Bloor's (2007, pp. 12-13) explanation of the 'main objectives' of CDA: '[T]o analyze discourse practices that reflect or construct social problems; to investigate how ideologies can become frozen in language and find ways to break the ice; to increase awareness of how to apply these objectives to specific causes of injustice, prejudice, and misuse of power; to demonstrate the significance of language in the social relations of power; to investigate how meaning is created in context; and to investigate the role or speaker/writer purpose and authorial stance in the construction of discourse.'

ways in which a text can be read, nor the social context in which discursive texts are produced and consumed. More important is his view that CDA often forces ideological meanings onto texts to suit the needs of the analyst.

Widdowson is not alone. Similarly, Verschueren (2001), for example, claims that CDA often states the obvious from the analyst's point of view, whose opinion is no different than the participants being studied. This sometimes results in one ideology being replaced by another, which then leads to the projection of particular images of society or social structures onto different discourses. In doing so, CDA becomes 'symptomatic.' That is, it tries to prove its point based on a set of notions preconceived by the analyst. Similarly, Schegloff (1997) accuses CDA practitioners of projecting their personal political biases and prejudices onto their data and analysing them accordingly. This results in 'stable patterns of power relations' being sketched, 'often based on little more than social and political common sense,' which are then 'projected onto (and into) discourse' (Blommaert, 2005, p. 32). Furthermore, Slembrouck (2001) finds fault with the 'explanatory level' found in CDA. He disagrees with Fairclough's belief[28] that CDA 'moves from ideology-dominated interpretation to "absolute" or "pure" explanation by drawing on social theory' (Blommaert, 2005, p. 32). Slembrouck takes issue with Fairclough by stating adamantly that all discourse and social activity is affected by ideology, yet Fairclough conducts discourse analysis that often ignores ideology and relies more on social theory. For Slembrouck (2001, p. 42), CDA suffers from the same dangers of 'social-theoretical reductionism' and 'linguistic reductionism' that CDA claims to fight in the first place.

I agree there is danger in conducting CDA and imposing one's own truths and/or ideologies onto the discourse being analysed, thus closing the dialogic process. This can be extremely problematic when the participant is 'pushed out' of the explanatory phase of the analysis, particularly since one of the ultimate goals of CDA is the empowerment of those being analysed. As Blommaert (2005, p. 33) rightly points out: 'Less than careful CDA may thus result, not in an empowered subject speaking with a more audible voice, but in a stentorian analyst's voice.' We can believe—and I suggest that Fairclough would concur—that the dangers posited by Schegloff, Verscheuren, and Widdowson can be avoided if CDA is presented in a

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[28] See Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999).

well-formed argument, one that can remain authoritative over time and have concrete, focused applications.

The advantages of CDA lie in the fact that we should envision CDA as a multidisciplinary approach to analysing discourse. In addition, CDA often provides a 'voice' for groups suffering from social discrimination, and it tries to expose both overt and covert power relationships.[29] CDA also declares that all forms of discourse are historical, and therefore can only be understood contextually, while paying attention to extralinguistic factors, such as culture, society, and ideology. Furthermore, CDA looks at the intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between discourse texts, as well as the relationships between language and society and how such analysis can mediate this relationship. In this study, I utilise the use of language in social action as it is represented in American fantasy films. Therefore, I rely mainly on the cultural and socio-political aspects of Fairclough's approach to CDA to examine the filmic messages, as well as examine the social aspects of film-based discourse. But I will supplement Fairclough's approach with the theoretical concepts of Kress, Wodak, and van Dijk where appropriate.

1.4 Applying Fairclough's 3D Approach to Film Analysis

Adopting those elements of Fairclough's brand of CDA that support a cultural/socio-political studies approach is the most appropriate method for analysing the fantasy films selected because he takes a multi-methodological, three-dimensional approach to CDA to examine the social aspects of discourse,[30] and to highlight the 'socially and discursively embedded nature of any text' (Locke, 2004, p. 42). Considered to be one of the 'founding fathers' of CDA, Fairclough is heavily influenced by Foucault,[31] particularly in how he defines discourse as 'a practice not just representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning' (Fairclough, 1992a, p. 64). He is interested in how social change is reflected in discursive activities and discursive texts, focusing on themes such as

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[29] See Meyer (2001, p. 14).
[30] See Fairclough, N., Mulderigg, J. and Wodak, R. (1997), Pêcheux (1982), and Wodak and Meyer (2001).
[31] Relevant here is Foucault's (1975) concept of 'dossier,' which is 'a case, an affair, an event that provides for the intersection of discourses that differ in origin, form, organization, and function.'

'neo-liberalism,' 'globalisation,' and 'knowledge and economy.' Fairclough (1995a, pp. 138-139) posits the 'promotional' and 'consumer' characteristics of contemporary culture, and how these 'designations point to the cultural consequences of marketization and commodification.'

The Truman Show, for instance, can be viewed as both a form of discourse as social spaces for cognition and interaction as well as a vehicle for selling goods through its use of product placement. However, this does not mean that *The Truman Show* is a pro-capitalism text. In fact, the case studies that follow show how this film, and others, both promote and are critical of capitalism, particularly because most of them were made during the Reagan presidency.

A Fairclough-based textual analysis is also fruitful because these fantasy films further serve as 'sensitive barometers of social processes, movement and diversity' (Fairclough, 1992b, p. 209). Therefore, they become 'particularly good indicators of social change' (ibid.). In fact, films often mirror different discourses and discursive social trends. Furthermore, the characters in these films reflect Fairclough's (1989, p. 36) dialectic, finding themselves in 'various positions' of both 'face-to-face' and 'hidden' power relations, and they are often being 'pulled in different directions.' *The Truman Show*, for example, reflects Foucault's 'bottom-up model of power,' which focuses on 'the way power relations permeate all relations within a society' (Mills, 2003, p. 34). As Truman gradually transforms himself from being Christof's (Ed Harris) 'passive dupe' into an 'active agent' in his quest to escape Seahaven and ultimately confront his maker, he becomes someone who is 'capable of acting creatively' in order to 'restructure his social condition' (Fairclough, 1992a, pp. 90-91). In fact, all of the protagonists in these films, due to their fantastic predicaments, must act creatively in order to survive and restore normalcy to their lives.

The Truman Show also reflects the complacency of American society in, as Ebert (1998, online) puts it, the way 'we accept almost everything in our lives without examining it very closely.' Indeed, Truman's struggle against power reflects Fairclough's (1989, p. 36) 'power behind discourse' and 'how orders of discourse, as dimensions of the social orders of social institutions or societies, are themselves shaped and constituted by relations of power.' The characters in these films, like people in societies, interact with one another and by doing so, a hierarchy is

established because 'more powerful participants may be able to treat [discourse] conventions in a more cavalier way, as well as to allow or disallow varying degrees of latitude to less powerful participants' (ibid., p. 39). These films also reflect different constructs of American culture, offering cultural representations that can thus be compared and evaluated.[32] Therefore, a socio-cultural analysis of these films allows for conclusions to be arrived at 'about the relative (un)truthfulness of [these] representations' (ibid.).

Fairclough's overall objective in CDA is to give accounts of how social changes are reflected discursively, and to elucidate the relationships between changes in discourse and changes in other non-discursive elements of 'moments' of social life. He achieves this by identifying and analysing the 'linguistic, semiotic and "interdiscursive"…features of "texts"…which are part of social change,' while addressing both 'abstract social structures and concrete social events as parts of social reality' (2005, online). This requires CDA to have a 'dialectical view of the relationship between structure and agency, and of the relationship between discourse and other elements of "moments" of social practices and social events' (ibid.). In other words, discourse both 'internalises' and is 'internalised by' other social elements. I find Fairclough's three-dimensional approach to CDA particularly useful for film analysis because it allows us to focus on the ways in which film texts are discursively positioned, how they are produced and disseminated, and how various socio-cultural practices and discursive conditions at both institutional and societal levels provide contextual relevance.[33]

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[32] This is based on '[w]hat they [films] include and what they exclude, what they foreground and what they background, where they come from and what factors and interests influence their formulation and projection…in terms of their partiality, completeness, and interestedness' (Fairclough, 1995a, pp. 47-52).

[33] Fairclough (1992a, p. 166) is also very much relevant to film analysis because he looks at issues of 'interactional control' (such as turn-taking and topic selection); 'modality' (how strongly propositions are endorsed); 'politeness' (the 'force' with which speech acts are made, such as promises and threats); 'ethos' (the 'sorts of identity [people] implicitly signal through their verbal and nonverbal comportment'); 'connectives' and 'argumentation' (the cultural or ideological significance of cohesion, including 'reference,' 'substitution and ellipsis,' 'conjunction,' and 'lexical cohesion'); 'transivity' and 'theme' (the ideational dimension of grammar, including 'relational,' 'action,' 'event,' and 'mental,' to which Fairclough adds 'theme' and 'nomilization'); 'word meaning' (vocabulary, including 'meaningful potential,' 'stability' and 'sense legitimation'); 'wording' (vocabulary and the

Like Fairclough, Gunther Kress also views language as a social practice—one that is used for representation and signification. These include visual images such as television and advertisements—and of course, film—as well as music and other non-verbal forms of communication, such as body language and gestures (also apparent in films). In addition, Kress (1993, p. 24), like Fairclough, is very much concerned with the role of genre in CDA, seeing it as 'the conventionalized aspect of the interaction.' I agree with Kress's belief that the social and cultural context of discourse texts provides a good place to start for the meaningful analysis of all aspects of language use. As Locke (2004, p. 21) puts it: 'it is the stability and repeatability of a social situation that leads to stability and conventionality in textual forms.' Clearly, films provide such a 'stable' and very much 'repeatable' means of analysing discourse in a variety of genres, which is particularly relevant to my analysis of American fantasy films. And as Hodge and Kress (1988, p. vii) point out, we live in a society where 'meaning resides strongly' in visual images.

Along with serving as models of discourse, films function to frame our collective reality, particularly in generating a key, 'feel-good' component that has become critical in a mass media environment where elected officials need both the support of their partisan colleagues, and the general public's support to push forward key policy moves. This was particularly true with Ronald Reagan, who, with years of Hollywood experience in finessing the art of performance, instinctively understood the maximising power of communicating a 'feel-good' consciousness. Neil Gabler (1999, online), for example, acknowledged that this art of performance—not conservative orthodoxy—represented what was closest to Reagan's heart.[34] Relegating policy discussions to the side, particularly those that imposed the greatest burden upon key constituencies, Reagan comfortably assumed

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different ways meaning can be 'worded'); and 'metaphor' (including the figures of speech: 'simile,' 'personification,' and 'metonymy').

[34] According to Gabler (1999, online): 'Reagan turned politics into a placebo by regarding Americans not as a constituency to be served, but as an audience to be uplifted. He recognized that politics, like the movies, could itself be a form of escapism. And that the presidency need not be a bully pulpit to hector, but rather could be a bull pom-pom to root.' Reagan was able to accomplish this 'by creating cinematic images that were impressed into our consciousness, like the welfare queen.'

the role of a genial leader whose principal responsibility was to lift the spirits of the American people.

I also draw on Wodak (2001b, p. 63) in order to take a 'discursive-historical' approach to film-based CDA when examining, for example, a film like *Pleasantville*. Wodak often finds 'ideological dilemmas…fragmentation…and multiple identities' as the 'answers to the challenges of globalization and neo-liberalist economies and ideologies.' This can result in strong nationalism and/or xenophobia, which can sometimes lead to dangerous abuses of power and dominance. While such phenomena are very complex, people tend to seek easy answers to problems. A good example of this can be seen in *Pleasantville*, when the mayor and town council try desperately to make sense of the changes that are disrupting their once bucolic lifestyle, imposing a strict set of rules in an effort to suppress what they view as unwanted behaviour.

Similarly, my film analyses draw on van Dijk (2001, p. 96), who shares an interest with other CDA practitioners in 'the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse and domination.' For example, when examining *The Truman Show*, it becomes clear that Truman is a victim of power abuse by his 'maker,' Christof. And in *Back to the Future* and *Pleasantville*, we can find examples of 'the exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups that results in social inequality' (van Dijk, 1993, pp. 249-250). Like Fairclough, van Dijk argues that discourse is very much a 'communicative event,' and he looks at both its personal and social-cognitive elements as well as the relationship between 'text' and 'context,' both of which are valuable tools in the critical discourse analysis of films.

1.5 Applying Critical Discourse Analysis to Reaganism

Reagan's election in 1980 came six years after the Watergate scandal ended the Richard Nixon presidency in disgrace, and five years after the collapse of South Vietnam into communist hands ended the war that inflamed the United States' own culture wars. He rode the utopian wave of renewed American patriotism propelled, in part, by like-minded literature and films that remembered the 1950s as an idyllic period—a time conveniently selected to obscure the emerging problems that eventually would become the driving force of the culture wars in the more turbulent

1960s and fitful 1970s. Consonant with Reagan's proclamation that it was 'morning in America'—the theme of his 1984 reelection campaign—the nostalgia for the 1950s represented a desire to recapture an era of unchallenged American dominance and, despite its racist and chauvinistic overtones, a desire to rediscover American innocence, which repeatedly had been shattered by a long and indecisive war in Southeast Asia, the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the distrust and disappointments in the presidencies of Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter—Reagan's immediate predecessors.

At the opposite ends of contemporary political debate, there are at least two Ronald Reagans: the glorious Great Communicator and the insensitive Great Devastator—and likely others—in the discourse today. Wistfully nostalgic conservatives commemorate the Reagan years as the golden age of political conservatism but, in fact, they have created a mythology about the conservative political movement. Many authors[35] have portrayed this glorious assessment with an imaginary Reagan who did, in fact, bring together the loose sections of a conservative coalition—ranging from religious conservatives to foreign policy hardliners to supply-side economists, and to libertarians concerned about the encroachment of federal government upon individual and state's rights. However, these same authors have glossed over key factors, such as tax increases, friendlier relations with the Soviet Union, and the preservation of abortion rights. Less concerned about communicating factual accuracy, they have sought to strengthen the political leverage of the Reagan legacy.

In 1983, Reagan made world headlines when he referred to the then-Soviet Union as an 'evil empire' in a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals. A strong example of the president's 'bully pulpit' impact, the speech was initially targeted to defuse the opposition's call for a nuclear arms freeze. However, in adding a paragraph referring to Soviet-style communism as the 'focus of evil in the modern world,' the president 'electrified dissidents behind the Iron Curtain and appalled Reagan's domestic opposition, including much of the press. The speech was destined to go down in history as one of Reagan's most influential addresses' (Ridenour, 2006, online). The speech also did much to inflate the hagiography surrounding

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[35] These include, just to name few: Harmer (2002), Schweizer (2003), Wallison (2004), Buckley (2001), Noonan (2001), and D'Souza (1999).

Reagan to the extent that he was deified and cleansed of any flaw in presidential decision making.

Reagan's words also mobilised his newfound Christian base in the United States as he targeted concerns about eroding family values, using as an example the controversy about federally funded clinics to deal with unplanned pregnancy, abortion-on-demand, and whether or not parents should be notified in cases when a teenager seeks advice from such clinics.[36] Among Reagan's most important socially conservative goals were ending abortion and strengthening the nuclear family concept. Yet, side-by-side, these goals engendered much friction and tension as later generations of right-wing conservatives discovered. Making abortion legally available precisely supported the ideal family unit envisioned by Reagan—two parents engaged in a stable relationship raising their children without the need for government assistance. In going unrepentantly to identifying opponents as 'evil' without necessarily sacrificing political power or legitimacy, Reagan had handed his partisan colleagues a tactical tool which would inflame political differences into 'culture wars' not just over technical policy issue points of abortion, affirmative action and free trade, but also broader concerns of racism, sexism, religious intolerance, homophobia, and economic injustice.

In 1992, then Vice President Dan Quayle, a Reaganite who served in the Bush Administration, amplified Reagan's ideological legacy by criticising an episode in the CBS television series, *Murphy Brown* (English, 1988-1998), in which Murphy (Candice Bergen), an unwed broadcast journalist, becomes pregnant and decides to raise the child on her own.[37] Intriguingly enough, many of Reagan's partisan followers have revised their stances in recent national elections (2000, 2004, 2008), sacrificing their objections to nontraditional families and relationships (e.g.

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[36] Reagan (1983, online) said: 'Many of us in government would like to know what parents think about this intrusion in their family by government. We're going to fight in the courts. The right of parents and the rights of family take precedence over those of Washington-based bureaucrats and social engineers.'

[37] Following his remarks about dismantling a welfare system that breeds dependency and subsidises broken families, Quayle (1992, online) added: 'Ultimately, however, marriage is a moral issue that requires cultural consensus, and the use of social sanctions. Bearing babies irresponsibly is, simply, wrong. Failing to support children one has fathered is wrong. We must be unequivocal about this. It doesn't matter when prime time TV has Murphy Brown—a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional women—mocking the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another 'lifestyle choice.'

unwed teenage daughters and lesbian parents) for an absolutist stance on doing away with all forms of abortion which resonates with a rejuvenated evangelical base that still sees Reagan as its leading hero.[38] Of course, many contradictions emerge when we take into account the aggressive campaign many evangelical conservatives have waged against legalising same-sex marriage.

Public admiration for Reagan could be characterised as being more performance based (i.e. he was named the 'Great Communicator') than ideologically based as American opinion polls have shown significant shifts in attitudes toward issues such as same-sex marriage, universal health care, comprehensive immigration reform, and concerns about racial profiling in crime. The tone of the current public dialogue has been pitched higher amid the presence of the nation's first African-American president—Barack Obama, a Democrat and a symbol of progressive evolution—who has directly challenged the Reaganesque political cynicism about government's effectiveness. Obama's election, in particular, has challenged the relevance, true sympathy, and appeal of a 'centrist' message of social liberalism, fiscal conservatism, and limited government that had carried Obama's immediate predecessors into office.

This continuing fixation on Reagan indicates just how unstable and decentered the public disposition has become. Obama's appearance on the national political scene confirms, in part, that American sensibilities about equality and egalitarianism do run deeper than the general cynicism about politics, and that Americans are increasingly uncomfortable and at odds about continuing to bridge this centrist divide if social and economic justice is ever to be achieved for all. However, the Reagan legacy remains extraordinarily resilient, especially now in the age of Obama. Pundits and pollsters extensively draw comparisons between the two figures. At the end of 2009, as Obama's first year in office was coming to an end, a

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[38] At the 2008 Republican National Convention, vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin, then governor of Alaska, brought on stage Bristol, her pregnant 17-year-old daughter, and her boyfriend at the time, Levi Johnston, 17. Likewise, Mary Cheney, daughter of Vice President Dick Cheney, also has stood out prominently as a gay parent. So strong is the impulse to support an uncompromising anti-abortion platform, many Republicans—who owe their political prominence to Reaganism—have ceded virtually all objections to any differences from the classic nuclear family concept.

nationally known polling analysis group reported 'striking' similarities in terms of the two presidents' public approval ratings.[39]

Newsweek's Howard Fineman (2009, online), for example, compared both in terms of their communication forte: 'He also shares Reagan's reverence for the power of a narrative in politics—Reagan, because he was an actor, Obama, because he is a writer.' However, lost in the mythological imaginings of Reagan's success as president is the palpable sense that current generations are as anxious as ever to reconcile the post-Vietnam era once and for all. And, just as the myth of the Reagan legacy has taken form in the electoral and governing discourse of the nation, the real and the imaginary in the selected films can become equally blurred.

Hollywood films often contain 'exaggerated' cultural contexts as well, reflecting situations that we would normally not find in 'real' life. This is particularly true of the fantasy film genre—including the six films chosen for this study—because the boundaries of this genre have never been well-defined (in fact, the same holds true for all film genres). Categorising a movie as fantasy may thus require an examination of the themes, narrative approach, and other structural elements of the film. For example, fantasy films are often in the context of the imagination, dreams, or hallucinations of a character, or within the projected vision of the storyteller. In addition, fantasy films often have elements of magic, myth, wonder, escapism, and the extraordinary. They may also appeal to both children and adults, depending on the particular film. The next chapter will thus provide a discussion of the genre characteristics of American-made fantasy films and dynamics of Reaganism, as well as the postmodern elements they embody.

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[39] Charles Franklin (2009, online) reported: 'I've been struck for some time by the similarity of circumstances between President Reagan and Obama. Both replaced deeply unpopular predecessors. Both enjoyed significant gains for their party in both houses of Congress. Both faced "worst since the depression" economic circumstances. And each in his own very different ways attempted to reshape government in the early months in office.'

Chapter 2:
Hollywood Fantasy Films as Postmodern Texts

2.1 What are Fantasy Films?

'Fantasy' is a term that is hard to define due to its 'free-floating' and escapist qualities. Literally, it means to 'make visible or manifest' (Jackson, R., 1981, pp. 1-2). As a genre, it is 'free' in the way that it can manipulate time, space, setting and characters. It does not have to present itself chronologically, three-dimensionally, nor make any distinction between animate and inanimate objects. As Nikolajeva (2003, p. 142) states: 'In fantasy, characters are ordinary…often…the protagonist is "just like you"' and 'there can be at least two possible interpretations of the events. They can be accepted as "real," having actually taken place, which means that as readers [and film viewers] we can accept the magic as part of the world created by the author.' Indeed, even the dead can come back to life.

In general, we could view all 'imaginative activity,' including films, as being 'fantastic,' though there is a tendency to view the fantasy genre[40] as one that does not give 'priority to realistic representations, such as myth, legends, folk and fairy tales, utopian allegories, dream visions, surrealist texts, science fiction, horror stories, all presenting realms "other" than the human' (Jackson, R., 1981, pp. 13-14). Mieville (2002, online) suggests two fundamental characteristics of the fantasy genre: 'its universe is radically ethical, founded on the struggle between good and evil, and that […] its medieval and magical landscape figures a rejection of the constraints modernity has placed upon "human creative power and freedom."' As our collective social and political imaginations have been able to engineer many insidious and terrifying events chronicled in our history, fantasy opens up a new path of imagining our existence that refuses to accept our otherwise hegemonic systems of oppression and conformity.

Among the most provocative and aggressively debated characteristics of fantasy come from Tzvetan Todorov (1975, p. 33), who coined the term 'the

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[40] The fantasy genre has a long history, going back as far as the Babylonian epic poem, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and Homer's *Odyssey* and *Beowulf*. Modern fantasy includes authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. Today, we most certainly would include the *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997-2007) books and films (Columbus, 2001, 2002; Cuarón, 2004; Newell, 2005; Yates, 2007, 2009, 2010 and 2011) as well as *The Lord of the Rings* (Jackson, P., 2001, 2002 and 2003) film trilogy.

fantastic' as being a liminal state of the supernatural. He considers a text to be 'fantastic' when it leaves the reader or viewer 'confused' as to whether the phenomenon is real or imagined. For Todorov (1975, p. 25), the fantasy genre is divided into three categories: 'the fantastic,' 'the uncanny,' and 'the marvelous,' and he defines the fantastic as 'that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.' He goes on to explain that the 'concept of the fantastic is therefore to be defined in relation to those of the real and the imaginary' (ibid.), which, for Todorov, originate in manmade dangers whether they occur through some contrived machinations or the individual's own metamorphosis or domination.

However, what is 'real' and what is 'imaginary'? A film text is certainly 'real' in its physical composition of visual images and sounds recorded on celluloid or in digital code. But can what a film portrays be considered a 'glimpse' of 'reality'? Postmodern thought says absolutely not: there is no such thing as 'real' or 'reality,' but there are experiences of ordinary events; there is only the 'now.' What fantasy does, in other words, is 'violate' reality—although the term 'reality' itself is open to numerous interpretations.

This study views 'reality' in Bakhtin's (1973, p. 94) terms; that is, the 'generally accepted, ordinary course of events and of the established norms of behavior and etiquette.' However, Bakhtin's definition of the fantastic is much too extreme to apply to the fantasy films chosen for this study because he points to the 'hostile' nature of fantasy in its efforts to 'shake up' the accepted norms of reality. For Bakhtin, fantasy breaks with the ordinary course of events, but this does not necessarily lead to reality dissipating completely or becoming particularly incoherent. While these fantasy films certainly do challenge our perception of reality, they are by no means incomprehensible—nor do they deconstruct established norms. Instead, they are closer to Irwin's (1976, p. ix) definition of fantasy as a 'kind of extended narrative which establishes and develops an antifact' and 'plays the game of the impossible.' Thus, fantasy stories overtly violate the general conception of reality by offering alternative, 'possible' constructs of reality.

Also relevant to this study of American fantasy films is Ryu (2007, online), who claims that the use of 'digital effects' to create different realities is clearly a

postmodern phenomenon.[41] That is, contemporary films seem to 'describe reality as it is, but it tacitly transforms shapes of reality by means of techniques' (ibid.).[42] As Adrian Carr (2004, online) states: 'For the postmodernist, there are no "grand narratives"[43]—reason is, itself, transitory and an illusionary construction of text.' Instead, they see a 'plurality of constructs by individuals' that becomes 'resolved, and shared meaning emerges through the very act of discourse itself' (ibid.). As a result, the 'construction of language becomes a crucial focus of what emerges as "truth"' (ibid.). In essence, 'reality' only comes into existence through interpretations of what the world means to us individually. However, when we are sitting in a dark movie theatre watching a film, it certainly *seems* real, doesn't it?[44]

In 2009, more than a few media commentators drew parallels between Barack Obama and Spock, the logical, cool-headed, half-Vulcan scientist played by Leonard Nemoy of the *Star Trek* series (Roddenberry, 1966-1969), whose unflappable composure served as a counterpoint to the visceral proclamations of a restless generation bedeviled by complex issues not suited to simplistic narratives.

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[41] Ryu (2007, online) further explains that the 'characteristic feature of the digital effects is not stable and continuous from the first, because it is always added onto the real-action footage, and immediately disappears after the specific scene wherein the effects are needed. The digital effects are not objects that can exist alone. When multi-layered time and space are compressed and composited with real-action footage, the digital effect can exist as a filmic object.'

[42] Ryu (2007, online) elaborates: 'The time of the digital effects merely or virtually refers to the time that they are manipulated and produced by the computer; it does not refer to any real time period…Thus, when we are amazed…when we are lost in admiration of the dazzling spectacle, and when we are appreciating the astonishment of technology, we are in the moment of postmodernity of compression of the multi-layered timespace, produced by the computer.'

[43] For Lyotard, there is only one grand narrative: modernists and philosophers address the problem by telling a story of progress through universal human reason. But this is problematic for Lyotard (1987) because once a 'truth' is accepted, we must prove our claims to the truth as well as prove our proofs, which then becomes a never-ending endeavor. Therefore, Lyotard claims that the 'postmodern condition' is one of incredulity toward grand narratives.

[44] Geraghty (2005, pp. 191-200), for example, in his discussion of myths in twentieth-century science fiction, points out that '*Star Wars* [Lucas, 1977], and, to some extent, *Star Trek* [Roddenberry, 1966-1969] have taken history and myth and transformed them into a new package, quite literally taking a postmodern approach to looking back at the past to learn about the present. This commodification of the past indicates a cultural engagement with nostalgia so intimate and impervious that, as Fredric Jameson (1983, p. 117) has pointed out, "we are unable today to focus on our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our current experience."'

The comparison was no trivial cultural parlor game.[45] Amid the turbulence of the late 1960s, the *Star Trek* television series was saved from cancellation in its first year thanks to an aggressive letter-writing campaign by viewers who closely followed the travels of an enlightened, professional, informed space crew and saw a useful counterpoint to the emotionally-charged protests and riots that dominated the nightly news.

Likewise, the fantastic, in Todorov's (1975, p. 25) view, 'implies an integration of the reader [and viewer] into the world of the characters.' In other words, it is a world defined by how we perceive the narrative events. For example, in the movie *Big*, when we see that 12-year-old Josh Baskin (David Moscow) wakes up and finds himself an adult in his thirties, Josh must pause (hesitate) and make a choice: 'either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, or a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us' (ibid., p. 31). Todorov claims that it is this 'hesitation' experienced by the reader (and film viewer) that is 'the first condition of the fantastic,' and he goes on to explain three conditions that must be fulfilled in order for a text to be considered fantastic.

For Todorov, the reader/viewer of a text must first consider the world in which the characters inhabit to be one of 'living persons,' causing us to 'hesitate' as we choose between a 'natural' or a 'supernatural' explanation. Second, the main character must also share in our hesitation when he or she initially encounters the fantastic situation. Finally, we must decide whether or not to 'reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretation' (ibid., p. 33), but we do not have to treat these three requirements equally because they do not always carry equal weight. Even Todorov admits that the first and third conditions may merely indicate the genre, and the second condition may not be met at all. In addition, he sees the fantastic condition

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[45] Jeff Greenwald (2009, online), author of *Future Perfect: How 'Star Trek' Conquered Planet Earth* (1998), expanded upon the parallel: 'Obama, like Spock, rewards close listening. His cool logic is a real departure from what we've grown used to. Often presidential speechmaking is an emotive art, where oratory trumps reason. What was being said was often confused with how it was being said. We could watch Ronald Reagan with the sound off, and get a pretty good sense of how we were supposed to feel. Bill Clinton's richly accented arias lulled us, while reactions to the appearance of George W. Bush—pro or con—were driven less by analysis than by a limbic, visceral response.'

threatened by how a text is interpreted. That is, if we *know* that a text is not supposed to be taken literally—such as a fable in which animals speak—then the text becomes allegorical. In contrast, fantasy films, in their ability to visually and aurally mimic 'reality,' allow us to suspend belief and thus prolong the 'hesitation' necessary for the film to remain an authentic fantasy text.

However, while the films chosen are indeed fantastic texts, they also migrate into Todorov's other categories of the 'uncanny' and 'the marvelous.' A text is considered to be 'uncanny' when an unusual phenomenon turns out to have a rational explanation, or 'marvelous' when the phenomenon appears to be supernatural in nature. Todorov believes that the fantastic condition can only exist as long as the hesitation is experienced by *both* the character and the reader/viewer. Thus, at the end of the movie, we must make a choice: if we decide 'that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described,' the text belongs to the uncanny. In contrast, if we decide 'that the laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena' (ibid., p. 41), the text belongs to the marvelous.

Critics take Todorov to task for constructing the fantastic too simplistically through binary dimensions. For example, Stanislaw Lem (1974, 1975, online), cites those instances when readers know the genre well enough not to anticipate the 'hesitation' between natural and supernatural explanations, even when the text circumstances appear to support Todorov's definition of the fantastic. Lem (1975, online) claims:

> [T]here are literary works that comply perfectly with all the conditions *necessary* [author's italics] and *sufficient*, according to Todorov, to produce "fantastic effect" but that have nothing in common with our intuitions of what we are accustomed to regarding as "fantastic." What follows can now be said easily. *Sometimes* the Todorovian conditions are fulfilled by what we are accustomed to calling "fantastic," and *sometimes* they are not.

Instead of referencing hesitation as the essential term, Cortázar and Safir (1976, pp. 522-532) describe the reaction to the fantastic as puzzling, temporarily disorienting, or effectively transforming one's thinking. While some readers (or viewers) might see the story as a fabrication or a literary cheat, others see the fantastic as an

opportunity to escape their routine perceptions and conceptualisations, even if vicariously. Cortázar and Safir sees the fantastic space as being 'interstitial, slipping between two moments or two acts in order to allow us to catch a glimpse, in the binary mechanism which is typical of human reason, of the latent possibility of a third frontier' (ibid., p. 526), a concept which is clearly evident in many fantasy films.

Therefore, these 'fantastic' stories are elevated from escapist and evasive entertainment or literary platforms to philosophical and critical analysing levels, challenging readers and viewers to venture beyond comfortably familiar social constructions to try and grasp that which is yet unidentifiable and unacknowledged. This analysis requires the discussion of sociohistorical, sociopolitical, and sociocultural contexts, which, in turn, helps to reinvigorate and expand Todorov's thinking about the 'fantastic' beyond the binary dimensions. It thus becomes a worthwhile critical analysis broadening the debate and inquiry into specific cultural norms and stereotypes, as well as the problematic issues targeting personal, local, and national identities.

While Rosemary Jackson (1981, p. 6) acknowledges the importance of Todorov's critical analysis of fantasy, she claims that he 'fails to consider the social and political implications' which, because fantasy 'deals so blatantly and repeatedly with unconscious material…it seems rather absurd to try to understand its significance without some reference to psychoanalysis and psychoanalytical readings of texts.' She also accuses Todorov of paying little attention to the ideological implications of the fantastic. This is important, Jackson believes, because ideology 'is not simply handed down from one conscious mind to another, but is profoundly *unconscious*' (ibid., p. 61). And because the fantastic so often deals with the unconscious, Jackson believes that Todorov is mistaken 'to ignore the ways in which [fantastic texts] re-presents the relations between ideology and the human subject' (ibid.). Therefore, she asserts that it is necessary to work through the psychoanalytical aspects of fantasy—particularly Freud's theories of the uncanny[46]—in order to 'see the modern fantastic as…preoccupied with unconscious desire and to relate this desire to cultural order, thereby correcting Todorov's neglect

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[46] See Freud's 1919 essay *The Uncanny* (2003), in which he defines the uncanny as a class of frightening things that leads us back to what is known and familiar.

of ideological issues' (ibid., pp. 62-63). Still, Todorov's definition of the fantastic most closely and accurately describes the fantasy nature of these films due to the 'hesitation' and 'disbelief' that is so clearly exhibited by the main characters and shared with us, the viewers.[47]

The fantasy film genre follows how Fairclough (1995a, p. 78) defines change in discursive events as 'innovations or creativity, which in some way goes against conventions and expectations.' For example, when Truman decides to leave Seahaven at the end of *The Truman Show*, we can 'accept' the 'reality' that Truman's entire life took place inside the enclosed and controlled environment of a giant TV studio set. Truman is simply leaving his 'uncanny' environment and entering the 'real' world. In *Peggy Sue Got Married*, when Peggy Sue (Kathleen Turner) awakens from her coma, we discover that her entire journey into the past was nothing more than an 'uncanny' dream, albeit one that has had a significant impact on both her present and future life. Additionally, because Josh's desire to be 'big' comes true through a wish he makes on the Zoltar machine, *Big* becomes a supernatural tale of the 'marvelous.' In short, these are all films that ask us, 'What if?' and, by doing so, they also allow the main characters to challenge and exact change in order to escape and/or resolve their postmodern predicaments.

Furthermore, the discursive change found in these fantasy film texts involve 'forms of transgressions, crossing boundaries,' and they include characters who, due to their unusual circumstances, find themselves 'de-centered' in a postmodern 'sense of struggle between different ways of signifying a particular domain of experience' (ibid.). In other words, the real and the imaginary become blurred, as evidenced by David/Bud (Tobey Maguire) who desperately wonders in *Pleasantville*: 'It's not possible. Is it possible? It can't be possible.'

Films provide an extremely interesting medium for portraying the fantastic because of the way in which the camera's eye 'problematizes vision' (Jackson, R., 1981, pp. 30-31) through the characters in the story. Movies can present '"unreal" combinations of objects and events as "real" through the camera eye itself and, in

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[47] Nikolajeva (2003, p. 141) supports this notion: 'The essence of fantasy literature [and films] is the confrontation of the ordinary and the fabulous. Here, the categories proposed by Tzvetan Todorov may prove useful. In his study of the fantastic, Todorov draws clear distinctions among the uncanny, the marvelous, and the fantastic, in which the last is characterized by a strong sense of hesitation.'

this sense, the cinematic process itself could be called "fantastic"' (ibid.). The fantastic operates elusively in that it is reluctant to provide 'definitive versions of "truth" or "reality"' by 'offering a problematic re-representation of an empirically "real" world' (ibid., p. 37). In the fantastic, a gap exists between sign and meaning—first, in its presentation of 'nameless' things, and second in its formulation of 'thingless names' (ibid.). Therefore, the 'signifier is not secured by the weight of the signified: it begins to float free' (ibid.). In fantasy cinema in particular, this gap is opened to such a degree that for Jackson, the 'relation of sign to meaning is hollowed out' (ibid., p. 40), so much so that anything becomes possible, as long as we can accept that it is 'just a movie.'

Consider Rickert's (2007, pp. 61-62) definition of fantasy as involving 'the hallucinatory satisfaction of a wish,' whereas '[p]sychoanalysis…theorizes fantasy…as an idealizing framework that functions in support of reality and that should accordingly be understood as constituted a priori through subjective and unconscious forces.' In addition, he cites Žižek (1997, p. 66) who similarly claims that 'we can see clearly how fantasy is on the side of reality, how it sustains the subject's "sense of reality."'[48] Rickert (2007, pp. 61-62) further draws on Žižek when claiming that '[f]antasy's endless permutations give to reality the particular consistency we require.'[49]

In *The Parallax View* (Žižek, 2006, p. 6), which synthesises all of his previous work, Žižek makes clear that because the focus of psychoanalysis is 'the Social,' it becomes the most extensive practice of liberation possible. It is not intent on helping the subject become normal, but on helping the subject acknowledge and accept the fundamental premise that there is no symbolic order explaining or guaranteeing everything. Žižek's work gains further currency in explaining how

[48] Žižek (1997, p. 66) adds: '[W]hen the phantasmic frame disintegrates, the subject undergoes a 'loss of reality' and starts to perceive reality as an 'irreal' nightmarish universe with no firm ontological foundation; this nightmarish universe is not 'pure fantasy' but, on the contrary, that which remains of reality after reality is deprived of its support in fantasy.'

[49] Rickert (2007, pp. 61-62) further elaborates on Žižek: 'Since one aspect of the Real is that it pertains to fundamental antagonism or inconsistency that remains unsymbolizable yet operational in the symbolic order, we can understand fantasy as providing the necessary screens allowing us to live with this inconsistency. Žižek takes this concept even further by pointing out that fantasy structures the entire array of human experience; it is "the frame through which we experience the world as consistent and meaningful" (1989, pp. 58-59).'

psychoanalysis is not simply an account of individual psyches, or individualised perceptions and patterns of thought, but a broader and more comprehensive account of the 'Social'—that is, society and every element of the tensions, breaks, ideologies, laws, rules, mores, desires, fantasies, pleasures, and entertainment it contains—and the way in which this 'Social' level is inscribed within individuals. In the broadest spectrum, the individual then emerges as being interesting only as a corporeal host for at-large social tensions, struggles, and formations. Therefore, psychoanalytic theory enables the analyst to consider ideology, ethics, open secrets, and similar matters because these exist only insofar as they are materialised in the practices of subjects.

Jackson (1981, p. 3), on the other hand, sees fantastic texts as 'expressing desire,' a genre that 'seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss.' She sees fantasy expressing desire in two ways: 'it can *tell* of, manifest or show desire…or it can *expel* desire,' particularly when desire 'is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity' (ibid.). However, fantasy texts often do both: 'desire can be "expelled" through having been "told of" and thus vicariously experienced by author and reader' (ibid.)—and, in the case of films, author and viewer. These texts have the ability to trace the 'unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over, made "absent"' (ibid., p. 4). While fantasy has the capacity to take us away from the mundane and to delineate the phenomenological boundary in taking away the messiness of our human problems, the most formidable challenge for us is to strike the most feasible balance between the real experienced world and fantasy.

Fantasy plays with popular ideas of 'reality,' mixes them up and inverts them. And because of its close relationship with what is perceived as 'real,' fantasy cannot exist independently from it. Irene Bessière (1974, p. 62) furthers this notion in her belief that the fantastic is 'intimately linked to the real and the rational; it is not equated with irrationality.' In fact, fantasy is 'anti-rational' in the way it often attacks, challenges, and contradicts pseudo-rationality. Fantasy creates an alternative *illusion* that is readily apparent in my selection of films.

Films, in general, present discursive aspects of different identity constructs, enabling us to analyse different perspectives of reality. And, just as important, if not more so than the motions and movements conveyed in cinema, it is the *visual* and

aural nature of film that gives it the *illusion* of reality. We can *see* and *hear* the characters walking, talking, interacting, suffering, and rejoicing in a variety of settings, all of which appear to be physically 'real.'[50] Of course, when we watch a movie, we are aware that we are entering a fictional world. It is not the purpose of cinema to 'trick' us into believing that what we are seeing is really happening. Rather, it is the purpose of cinema to allow us to *believe* what is happening while we experience a film.

For example, films such as *Back to the Future*, *Big*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Pleasantville*, and *The Family Man* are all set in suburban America where, if it weren't for the fantastic situations in which the main characters find themselves, we would not expect to find anything out of the 'ordinary.' Even the false reality of *The Truman Show* is 'believable' because Seahaven *looks* like any average small town in America. These are films that echo Dostoevsky's belief that 'the fantastic must be so close to the real that you almost have to believe in it' (Linnér, 1970, p. 748). Therefore, the height of cinematic realism occurs when we allow ourselves to 'believe' what we are seeing and hearing on the screen—or as Coleridge put it so poetically: 'that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment.'[51]

Films can also be viewed from the 'Critical Realism' perspective of Roy Bhaskar,[52] who believes that we are only able to interpret physical reality through sensory data; thus, there can be no direct interpretations. This theory is potentially applicable to films because they provide a visible and aural sensory record of external objects, properties and events. That is, a film can depict an objectively

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[50] Metz (1977, pp. 7-8), for example, argues that it is movement that creates the illusion of reality in cinema because 'the spectator always sees movement as being present.' That is, 'presence is assumed to be the criterion for establishing the real' (Temenuga, 2002, online). In fact, movement's intangibility almost 'guarantees' a cinematic sense of reality. Movement for Metz is 'insubstantial' because it is something that can be seen but not touched. As such, 'it cannot encompass two degrees of phenomenal reality, the "real" and the copy…dissolves on the threshold of the motion' (ibid.). And because movement is visual and not material, 'to reproduce its appearance is to duplicate its reality' (ibid.). In other words, cinema gives us the *impression* of reality through the motions conveyed in the film.

[51] See Engell and Bates (1983, p. 312). Overall, we can only perceive 'reality' through our senses: such as the perception of colours, sounds, smells, etc.—so much so that our perception of the physical world can only be inferred; it cannot be known directly. In short, we can only perceive of a *representation* of reality, not the reality itself.

[52] See Collier (1994) for an accessible explanation of Bhaskar's often complex ideas.

knowable, mind-independent reality. However, it is too simplistic to treat films as an intra-semiotic exercise of social practice or social construction. In the realm of CDA, any analytical understanding of semiosis necessitates exploring the external (or extra-semiotic) conditions—the hegemonic processes—that make semiotics effectively possible in the first place, and reflect the hegemonic struggles in the wider sense of the social world (Fairclough, 1992a, p. 270). Therefore, rather than argue about what is 'real,' it is more useful to approach film texts from the perspective of Kilborn and Izod (1997, p. 53) who state: '[T]here is no single, primary world upon which we all agree and to which we give various kinds of representation. Rather there are multiple worlds—and we give them various representations.' In other words, reality cannot be discerned from a single perspective.

With regard to fantasy films, it is important to keep in mind Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2004, pp. 106-107) assertion that: 'In many cultural contexts the crucial role in communicating cultural truths and culturally endorsed courses of action is played not by factual but by fictional texts, stories set in a distant past rather than in the present, and played out amongst "others," rather than amongst "us."'[53] Furthermore, these cultural constructs can be compared and evaluated on the basis of what they include as well as what they omit, and 'what they foreground and what they background, where they come from, and what factors and interests influence their formulation and projection' (Fairclough, 1995b, pp. 47-52). A good example would be the significant information technology advances, which remind us just how rapidly the frame of reference can change from one generation to the next.[54]

For general purposes, fantasy films can loosely be described as movies 'that base their content upon some degree of scientific truth…where events are unlikely to

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[53] Machin and Van Leeuwen (2004, pp. 106-107) further explain that 'Bruno Bettelheim (1976) makes this point in relation to fairy tales. Ordinary issues are not present in fairy tales, and this allows heroes to flaunt their powers in a conveniently formulated reality. In movies, similarly, audiences are able to accept coincidences and absurdities as they are trained to follow movie causality in terms of its own logic.' For example, 'Advertisements, despite their pragmatic, persuasive goals, often have low modality, showing fantasies and daydreams rather than realities, and impossibly beautiful and glamorous supermodels rather than real people.'

[54] Virtually all of today's college students in the United States, for instance, live in a world where GPS satellite navigation systems, caller ID, hand-held game play units, and electronic portals for work, school, banking, and shopping have always been available.

occur in real life' (Dirks, 1996-2011, online). They are films that offer extraordinary situations and, unlike science fiction, they are often stories that take place in what we consider 'normal,' everyday life and surroundings. As such, they often appeal to our emotions, for as Pringle (2006, p. 8) states: 'Fantasy is the fiction of the heart's desire.'[55] In this sense, fantasy texts have a healing effect, unlike the intellectual appeal of science fiction, but surprisingly more like horror, which produces emotional reactions in readers and viewers. But unlike horror, fantasy produces more 'positive' emotional reactions. In other words, '[d]esire, wonder, yearning and nostalgia all have their place' in fantasy texts, 'as does laughter' (ibid.). In these fantasy films, 'the hero continually and distinctly feels the contradiction between two worlds, that of the real and that of the fantastic, and is himself amazed by the extraordinary phenomena which surrounds him' (Todorov, 1975, p. 26).[56] There is always a distinct tension between the 'real' and the 'unreal,' and it is felt and experienced by both the characters in the film and the viewers. In fact, this 'tension' is an absolutely necessary element in the films I have marked for this study. Not only does tension drive the narrative, but without it, these films would quickly leave the fantastic realm.

The six films selected for this study can be grouped together as 'contemporary' fantasy films[57]—films that feature magical effects and/or supernatural events that occur in the 'real' world of today. And while they are indeed classified as fantasy, they also contain elements of romantic comedy, melodrama,

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[55] Pringle (2006, p. 8) further explains: 'All the forms—sf, horror, magic realism—overlap to some extent, and all are examples of the fantastic, but none of them is quite what we mean by fantasy proper. Pure fantasy, or what the critic John Clute calls "full fantasy," [Clute and Grant, 1999] seems to deal in the fulfillment of desire—not in the simple carnal sense (although it can pander to that too) but in the sense of the yearning of the human heart for a kinder world, a better self, a wholer experience, a sense of truly belonging.'

[56] Todorov cites Olga Riemann as a 'more recent German example,' yet fails to provide any bibliographic information for the source of this quote.

[57] The fantasy film genre has a long history, dating back to the silent era with films such as *The Thief of Bagdad* (Walsh, 1924). With the advent of sound came what many consider to be the most famous fantasy film of all time, *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939). Also notable is *King Kong* (Cooper and Shoedsack, 1933), though many would argue it is a horror-adventure film more than it is fantasy. Even the film *It's a Wonderful Life* (Capra, 1946), considered by many to be one of the best films ever made, can be viewed as a fantasy film in that the main character, George Bailey (James Stewart), is guided by his guardian angel Clarence Odbody (Henry Travers) to do the right thing.

science fiction, etc. For example, *Back to the Future*, while certainly a fantasy film based on time travel, is also an action/adventure/comedy/science fiction movie. In addition, it contains many cinematic conventions: Irish American characters (The McFly family), the dysfunctional family (again the McFlys), destiny, 1950s nostalgia, reversal of fortune, just to name a few. In this sense, the fantastic can be viewed as a narrative mode occurring in all sorts of genres.

2.2 The Postmodern in Contemporary Fantasy Films

The films chosen for this study are postmodern texts. However, 'postmodernism,' like 'discourse' and 'text,' is a term with many definitions, and Hassan (1985, p. 121) even regards it as an oxymoron: 'How can something be post, or after the modern, when the modern represents the present, or recent movement?' In order to reduce this complexity for the film analyses, we will distinguish between postmodernism as a philosophy, as an artistic style, and as a historical period.

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, French philosophers such as Derrida, Baudrillard, and Lyotard offered theories that they believed were both applicable and needed to grasp and understand an increasingly technological and information-based, ever-shrinking global world. For example, Derrida used deconstruction as an attempt to open any text to several meanings or interpretations, which he saw as fluid rather than static. Baudrillard, on the other hand, focused on seduction, simulation, and hyperreality (e.g. the notion that signification, and, therefore, meaning is self-referential—that is, it is construed upon absence). Instead of viewing the world as a 'global village,' he saw the opaqueness of society, where reality has been reduced to self-referential signs of itself. Lyotard, meanwhile, was vehemently opposed to the 'universalist' claims of the Enlightenment, metanarratives, and generality. Instead, he saw postmodernism as characterised by micronarratives.

However, while these philosophers had differing opinions, they shared their advocation of multiplicity and difference over totalisation and regimentation. They rejected 'totalising' principles and ideas, and embraced the idea that the postmodern world is based on ungovernable and irreconcilable differences. In this context, they saw 'truth' as being socially and historically constructed instead of being something that is fixed or eternal. In general, they rejected Freud and psychoanalysis as being

too reductive in its belief that everyone must struggle with and try to resolve the same problems. They also accused Marxism of being too reductive in its suggestion that all societies will eventually transform themselves into communist states. On the other hand, they also rejected free-market capitalism and its attempts to 'totalise' the world into one monocultural society. Furthermore, they saw religion as being too absolutist. In essence, they rejected all of these metanarratives, such as the notion of 'self,' because instead of being self-contained, self-determined individuals, each and every one of us is a 'multiplicity' of socially-learned selves. Thus, they also rejected the idea of 'teleology'—the notion that we are all moving in the same, unavoidable, pre-ordained direction. Finally, they denounced the idea of 'representation'—for example, that a word or image can represent an absent 'real' thing (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 35-88).

Postmodernists denounce these metanarratives because they fear that such totalising theories and ideas can be used to force uniformity and predictability on the world and the people who live in it. Instead, they believe that we can become 'better' and more 'humane' if we are willing to embrace the unpredictable, the unexplainable, and the different. Human beings *construct* their truths—all temporary and highly subjective—based on many factors, such as who they are, where they are, and when they are. Accordingly, they believe that by recognising this fact, we will be less likely to use our 'truths' to harm others. For example, as the story unfolds in *The Truman Show*, maintaining a status quo about a specific, carefully constructed understanding of reality of one's self becomes especially vulnerable and untenable when the simulation (i.e. tension) has been conceived and constructed as being the ideal. So, like Truman, we can be emboldened to use our imaginations, suspend our disbeliefs, remove our masks, and eventually break free from the entanglements of our own institutional artifices.

We now live in a multi-semiotic world of discourse and discursive texts spewing forth from TV, computer, and movie screens, the mass media, etc.—what Baudrillard calls a 'precision of simulacra.'[58] In fact, he claims (Baudrillard, 1983, pp. 41-42) that it is images and simulations that now precede the 'real' world, and our concept of 'reality' is nothing more than an imitation of these images and simulations. Baudrillard traced the progression from the era of the original to the

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[58] See Poster (1988, pp. 166-184).

counterfeit, from the counterfeit to the produced, mechanical copy, to the 'simulated,' where the copy has actually replaced the original. As a historical period, postmodernism's past is the present. In fact, did the past ever really go away? Everything seems to live on in a perpetual culture of copies, repetitions, and repackagings.[59] As a result, we might often feel nostalgic for times extant to their existence—and movies are particularly good at making them seem and feel like 'the good old days.'[60]

Postmodernism is postindustrial in that today's economy seems more about creating, managing, moving and selling the abstract, such as information, than solid, tangible goods like lumber and steel. This has caused life to become 'fragmented'— human beings must play many different roles, which often leaves them feeling 'decentered.' Indeed, it is this 'decenteredness' that characterises all of the main characters in the six films chosen for this study, and it serves as my main criteria for considering these films as postmodern texts. This follows the assumptions of Habermas, Lyotard, and Jameson, who all recognised that 'fragmented or decentered experience is a constituent of the postmodern condition' (Harper, 1994, p. 8). As postmodern texts, films often try to reflect this decenteredness by working with intertextual and intermedial fragments, pastiche, etc.

The selected films are marked by postmodern pastiche in the way they often mimic the past. For example, *Pleasantville* is a prime example in the way it emulates

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[59] For example, we can still watch reruns of *The Three Stooges* (Fryar and Vincent, 1960-1972) and *The Little Rascals* (Gordon and Horne, 1955)—as well as the fantasy films discussed in this study—a countless number of times on cable TV, listen to the Beatles, and readily access the films spanning the entire history of cinema on DVDs, the Internet, and through social media networks.

[60] Geraghty (2005, pp. 191-200) notes Jameson's explanation that *Star Wars*' use of nostalgia to convey the past metonymically is indicative of an American yearning to return to more innocent times—the films and Saturday afternoon television serials such as *Buck Rogers* (Beebe and Goodkind, 1939, Henry, 1950-1951) and *Flash Gordon* (Stephani, 1936, Zigman, 1954). Telotte (2001, p. 105) goes further and describes *Star Wars* as 'homage to a great number of films and film-types—the western, war films, Japanese samurai films—all of which have contributed to Lucas's vision.' Indeed, this trend is not unique to *Star Wars* but marks 'the stirrings of a postmodern pastiche influence that has increasingly characterized our science fiction films' (ibid.).

the once popular television show, *Father Knows Best*[61] (Russell and Tewksbury, 1954-1960) and middle-class, suburban American life in the 1950s. Jameson (1991, p. 17) is particularly critical of postmodern pastiche because he views the death of the modern autonomous self as carrying significant implications for the 'emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense.' In other words, Jameson sees the death of the individual subject and therefore personal style. As a result, all that is left is 'blank parody.'[62] However, we could argue that it is pastiche that makes films such as *Pleasantville* or *Peggy Sue Got Married* interesting because it is human nature to want to look back and wax nostalgic about the past, just as it is human nature to want to look back and see what our parents were like before we were born—as Marty is given the opportunity to do in *Back to the Future*.

When we think of 'postmodern' films, *Blue Velvet* (Lynch, 1986) and *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) often come to mind. In fact, Denzin (1991, p. 65) goes so far as to call *Blue Velvet* 'a quintessential postmodern film,' and director David Lynch, 'one of America's leading makers of postmodern cinema.' They are both films that reflect the simulated realities found in Lyotard's (1984) and Baudrillard's (1983) vision of postmodern society. *Blue Velvet* in particular reflects Jameson's (1983, pp. 111-113, p. 125) view of postmodern texts: the blurring of boundaries between the past and the present through parody and pastiche, and placing us in a time frame of the perpetual present. But unlike the fantasy films examined in this study, these two films 'locate terror in nostalgia for the past' by exposing the 'violent margins (dope fiends, sexual perverts)' of the social and 'bring them to the center of safe society' (Denzin, 1991, p. 69). In contrast, films like *Back to the Future*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, and *Pleasantville* offer what can be considered to be a 'safer' form of nostalgia for the past, where life seems better than the way it is now. However, the

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[61] While the show is often regarded as an example of the conservative and paternalistic nature of American family life in the 1950s, it is also criticised for portraying an overly rosy picture of American family life.

[62] Jameson's (1991) critical description of pastiche, especially regarding the postmodern parodic practices of self-reflexivity and intertextuality. In other words, instead of being able to humorously but respectively imitate another style, postmodern pastiche has become a 'dead language,' one with no historical nor political content, rendering it unable to be effectively satirical.

protagonists are still 'de-centered,' clearly marking the films as postmodern fantasy texts.

Unlike 'the Enlightenment subject,' a human being who is seen as being a 'fully-centered, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action,' the 'postmodern subject' is someone with 'no fixed, essential or permanent identity' (Hall, S., 1992, p. 277). Instead, he or she assumes 'different identities at different times' (ibid.). That is, the postmodern individual is inherently 'de-centered' due to the 'heterogeneity and fragmented character of social and cultural "realities"' (Hill, 1998, p. 97). And as Harvey (1990, p. 41) rightly points out: '…postmodernist characters often seem confused as to which world they are in, and how they should act with respect to it,' a notion particularly true in the film *Big* because the adult world that Josh inhabits is the *same* world he inhabited as a kid, which only adds to his confusion about how he should behave. At least in *Back to the Future*, Marty knows that he should act differently in 1955 than he does in 1985, although he repeatedly makes blunders in this regard, as does Peggy Sue in *Peggy Sue Got Married*, and David/Bud and Jennifer/Mary Sue (Reese Witherspoon) in *Pleasantville*.

Another aspect of postmodern thought that is apparent in these films is that they are skeptical of history, reflecting Barnes' (1989, p. 137) belief that '[h]istory isn't what happened…History is just what historians tell us.' Much like movies, history is a 'construct of various texts' and each of these texts is 'open to multiple interpretations, and different texts often disagree' (Stucky, 1995, online).[63] *Back to the Future*, for example, is a film that reflects how we might tend to remember the 1950s with all of its pop-cultural artifacts. According to Stucky, however, 'things are not as we choose to remember them' (ibid.). This becomes apparent when Marty meets his mother in 1955 and she begins to romantically pursue him, unaware that he is her future son. That is, Marty's 'interpretation of history is quite different from hers' (ibid.). This is due to the fact that history can only be known 'from conflicting

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[63] Rickert (2007, pp. 36-37) also points out that: '[P]ost-structuralist and cultural studies rhetorics emphasize the constructed nature of truth, often reducing it to a "story" or a "fiction." In contrast, neo-Lacanian psychoanalysis suggests another dimension to truth that avoids the fictionalizing move, while refusing to fall back into a naïve realism or a positivistic account of objective truth. Lacan, for example, rejects any simple positivistic truth claims but nevertheless holds that science grants a form of access to the Real that produces truthful knowledge.'

perspectives'; therefore, 'known history "changes" as we consider new information and different angles' (ibid.). And a time-travel film like *Back to the Future* 'takes that logic to an extreme' (ibid.). We can also witness the same thing happening in *Peggy Sue Got Married* when Peggy Sue tries to avoid marrying Charlie (Nicolas Cage) in order to save herself from the heartache of separation and divorce in the future.

Vivian Sobchack (1999, pp. 273-274) goes even further than Stucky by claiming that postmodern films tend to 'conflate the past, present, and future,' and '*Back to the Future* is perhaps the most explicit representation of…new conservative nostalgia and its conflation and homogenization of temporal distinctions.' Marty's hometown of Hill Valley, for example, sets the stage for the past, present (and alternate present), and future scenes, and for Marty, all of these times get collapsed together. This adds to Marty's feelings of de-centeredness, for as Stucky (1995, online) points out: 'Between conflation and compression of time, it's easy to feel lost.' Barnes (1989, p. 137), in fact, uses being 'lost at sea' as a metaphor for our postmodern existence.[64] This postmodern figure who is 'lost at sea' is readily apparent in *The Truman Show*, as Truman tries to find his way out of Seahaven—in a sailboat no less—in his search for truth and ultimately, freedom. And because Doc's (Christopher Lloyd) time machine in *Back to the Future* runs on plutonium, which was not available in 1955, Marty is temporarily 'lost' until Doc can figure out a way to harness the energy of a bolt of lightning to power the DeLorean time machine's flux capacitor, thus enabling Marty to return to 1985.

These films should also be considered postmodern texts due to their reliance on nostalgia, which, according to Hutcheon (1998, online), is a prominent feature of postmodernism. In fact, she claims that nostalgia 'has become an obsession of…mass culture' (ibid.). But what exactly is nostalgia? Is it the symptom and/or cause of what Jameson (1991) sees as a rift between historical signifiers and their signifieds?[65] Or is nostalgia a 'social disease' as Stewart, S. (1993, p. ix) believes?

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[64] According to Barnes (1989, p. 137): 'How hopelessly we signal; how dark the sky; how big the waves. We are all lost at sea, washed up between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us.'

[65] Geraghty (2005, pp. 191-200) drives this point home in his discussion of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, claiming that '[h]istory is a representation of the past; it is information transformed into story, which, over time, becomes part of a shared mythology.' He goes on to explain: 'These stories and myths are retold [in fantasy

Or perhaps Lasch (1991, p. 14) is correct in his belief that nostalgia is the 'abdication of memory.' Defining nostalgia is never a simple task because it manifests itself both individually and culturally, both directly and indirectly.

Using postmodern terms, we can view nostalgia as a form of 'forgetting' the 'truthfulness' of the past. This often means looking at the historical past through rose-coloured glasses—that aching yearning for the 'good old days' that so marked the Reagan presidency in the 1980s and is so clearly reflected in *Back to the Future*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, and *Pleasantville*. But in postmodern thought, this 'forgetting' can be dangerous. As Ricoeur (2004, p. 412) states, forgetting 'remains the disturbing threat that lurks in the background of the phenomenology of memory and the epistemology of history.' Thus, it is often seen as a 'mistake' or an evasion of the past. Peggy Sue in particular seems acutely aware of this as she makes a concerted effort not to make the same mistakes in the past. But unlike Ronald Reagan, she is not denying her past history—she is trying to *change* it.

Perhaps postmodern nostalgia's biggest critic is Fredrick Jameson, who believes that the representation of past ideals and objectives through the use of codified styles leads to what he calls 'contemporary nostalgia culture' (1992, pp. 84-85). In other words, he sees postmodern culture as being marked by an unattainable desire for the past. He also sees a definite 'historicism' in postmodern culture's preoccupation with a false sense of history that results from a society in which nothing happens.[66] For Jameson (1991, p. 19), nostalgia attempts to recall the past through 'stylistic connotation, using "glossed-over" images of "1930s-ness" or "1950s-ness" by the attributes of fashion.' Nostalgia tries to recall the traditional

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texts]' and 'sometimes they are embedded in symbols and tropes or, as in the case of "going back in time," in stories concerning the dilemma between right and wrong. The stories they recount about the past in the future produce images that at the micro level some Americans use to perceive themselves as individuals both separate from and within society, and, at a macro level, use to recognize America as a community or nation. By telling the right stories…[including fantasy texts and films] can help America imagine itself acting as a community, pulling together to resolve its problems often tackled in weekly episodes, ultimately overcoming a national anxiety deeply rooted in the conception of its own history.'

[66] For Jameson (1992, p. 87): 'This very triviality of everyday life in late capitalism is itself the desperate situation against which all the formal solutions, the strategies and subterfuges, of high culture as well as of mass culture, emerge: how to project the illusion that things still happen, that events still exist, that there are still stories to tell, in a situation in which the uniqueness and the irrevocability of private destinies and of individuality itself seem to have evaporated.'

mannerisms of the past by contextualising them with an aesthetic form of the postmodern image. This aesthetic mode is a reaction to changes that occur within postmodern society, resulting in a decline of 'genuine' historicity and fragmented subjects. Indeed, Jameson sees postmodern culture as the direct result of our increasing inability to produce anything new that represents our experience of the here and now. However, Jameson is being far too cynical in this assumption because films *are* sometimes able to 'capture' the 'here and now.' Witness films such as *United 93* (Greengrass, 2006) and *World Trade Center* (Stone, O., 2006) that attempt to cover key perspectives of 9/11.[67]

Still, our postmodern world does seem to yearn for the past because, as Corliss (1986b, p. 10) points out: 'just about everybody wants to wake up from the dreary dreams and claustrophobic nightmares of their own lives—that the present is edged with tension and boredom and, seen through the soft focus of nostalgia, the past is as sweet as first love.' For Hutcheon (1998, online), nostalgia is something that selectively 'sanitizes' the past, making it feel more 'complete, stable, coherent' and above all, 'safe.' In other words, nostalgia makes the past very much unlike the present, which perhaps is why nostalgic films such as *Back to the Future* and *Peggy Sue Got Married* were so popular and remain appealing more than twenty years later.

We can even argue that these films are postmodern representations of history because of the very nature of film. Again, Jameson (1989, p. 527) is extremely critical of postmodern nostalgia films, claiming that they are 'fashion-plate,

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[67] See Pope's (2007, online) interesting discussion of Baudrillard's take on 9/11, in which 'Baudrillard indexes all the disaster movies that have as part of their narratives an attack on the U.S. and often the World Trade Center itself. Elsewhere Baudrillard notes that "if the cohesion of our societies was in the past maintained by the 'imaginary' of progress, it is maintained today by the 'imaginary' of catastrophe" [Baudrillard, 2002, p. 137]. Slavoj Žižek alludes to Baudrillard's argument in noting the "libidinal investment" we had in the attack: "That is the rationale of the often-mentioned association of the attacks with Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which happened as the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise" [Žižek, 2002, p. 16]. It is the "biggest surprise" because we do not expect to actually receive, directly, what we fantasize about, and when we are confronted with the core of our fantasy we can only experience it as traumatic. Simply put, our fantasy of terrorism was supposed to remain just that…We can certainly try to rewrite the past—that is the very dynamism, after all, of hyperreality—but we can just as well resist this tendency in indexing our having fantasized "9/11" before it actually happened.'

historicist films' that reveal 'the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past.' He views these films as inauthentic, imaginary fabrications of the past that often manipulate, distort, or downright ignore historical fact. However, Friedberg (1991, p. 419) argues that *every* film has a 'distanced relation…from its historical referent.' In other words, it is the medium of film and not postmodernism that gives the *illusion* of a 'perpetual present interminably recycled' (ibid.). Or as Jarman (1991, p. 86) points out: 'filmed history is always a misinterpretation. The past is the past, as you try to make material out of it, things slip further away.' Jarman's observation is a good one. Following the release of *The Social Network* (Fincher, 2010), film critics and even business journalists praised the telling of Mark Zuckerberg's story and the founding of Facebook as a profound artistic statement of human truths, despite the obvious lack of accuracy regarding factual details in the story.[68] On the other hand, not all critics were comfortable with the license the filmmakers used.[69]

This is no exception. For Ronald Reagan, in the year preceding his death at the age of 93 in 2004, nearly 16 years after the end of his presidency, the media already had spent several years preparing the multimedia tributes and obituaries that would air or go into print as soon as word of the president's death was made public. A few did not even wait for the passing, such as the History Channel cable network which aired its gauzy, ennobling tribute, 'Ronald Reagan: A Legacy Remembered,' in 2002. Similarly, in 2003 February, *Esquire* magazine proclaimed Reagan as 'the greatest living American.' Not only did these tributes skip over some of the most

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[68] Joe Nocera (2010, online), a business writer for *The New York Times*, called the film 'brilliant,' adding it was 'possibly the finest movie about business ever made.' As for film critics and fellow business journalists who were alarmed by the filmmakers' disregard for factual accuracy, he wondered whether those claiming an 'emphasis on "the facts" had really gotten any closer to the truth about Facebook's beginnings than' those involved with the film's production.

[69] See Harris (2010, online): 'We're used to seeing movies reprocess history and even current events into drama…But it's one thing to play with Tony Blair or Bill Clinton. It's a new kind of license to turn a real-life 26-year-old whose most life-changing decisions were made as a teenager into an incarnation of Silicon Valley killer instinct, undergrad dorkdom, impatient brilliance, and middle-class Jewish-American aspiration fighting the Wasp Establishment…It's a great idea for a character—but you don't have to be particularly sympathetic to Zuckerberg to understand his likely horror at having an entire set of motives, flaws, and vulnerabilities so publicly and permanently ascribed to him.'

embarrassing and bewildering aspects of his presidency,[70] they also gilded his legacy with swashbuckling tales of his Manichean view of staying the course in the rough seas of liberal demons and evil empires, where any accomplishment that did not explicitly advance conservative objectives be expurgated from the historical record. And, just as Seahaven, to a certain degree in *The Truman Show*, as well as *Pleasantville* and *Back to the Future* build upon fault-free nostalgic memories of the 1950s, the contemporary account of Reagan's legacy from the 1980s, especially from those who seek to recreate his unreal politics of optimism, aggressively sidesteps facts alluding to some of the president's most critical shortcomings.

Hutcheon (1998, online) also believes that the mass media has commercialised nostalgia at the expense of real 'contemporary issues and problems.' But she questions whether or not this is part of the 'postmodern.' Jameson would say that it is because it is a part of late-capitalist culture. But Hutcheon counters this notion, claiming that 'to generalize the term "postmodern" into a synonym for the contemporary is to abandon its historical and cultural specificity—an abandonment Jameson would never condone for modernism' (ibid.). For Hutcheon, postmodern nostalgia creates a paradox because the act of calling up the past, exploiting it, and calling it 'authentic' is a 'shameless invoking of the visceral power that attends to the fulfillment of that urge' (ibid.). The fantasy films chosen for this study, as well as others, reflect what Susan Schwartz (2001, p. 131) calls 'the fickleness of American culture and its search for rational, factual, and real' when in fact, 'it is not historically true.' Often referred to as a 'Teflon' president, Reagan mastered the art of stagecraft and presentation over substantive articulation of policy, data, and information, knowing quite well that the benefits in exchange were more than worth the price. As the star of his presidential movie, he gave the same sort of distinct pleasure and reassuring sense we can get from watching films.[71]

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[70] For example, the use of astrologers to consult on decisions and the carefully constructed rationale that no arms were ever traded for hostages in the Iran-Contra scandal.

[71] Žižek (2009, p. 49) writes: 'With Ronald Reagan…a different figure of the president entered the stage, a "Teflon" president whom one is tempted to characterize as post-Oedipal: a "postmodern" president who, being no longer even expected to stick consistently to his electoral program, has thus become impervious (recall how Reagan's popularity went up after every public appearance, when journalists enumerated his mistakes). This new kind of president mixes (what appear to be) spontaneously naïve outbursts with the most ruthless manipulation.'

The impact of Reagan's Hollywood effect on public discourse has been significant. Meaningful and intelligently-based issue and policy engagement has increasingly been subverted by various forms of escapist entertainment, whether its source is in the conflict itself, the pretense that the conflict can be resolved or the individual redeemed, or in the more basic value of escapist pleasure contained in the distraction away from the actual conflict. Every political contest of policy debate is framed either as a horse race, an arms contest, or as a game of athletics or gambling; where much of these issues in conversations are rarely about the matter at hand, and more about the mundane and banal struggle for readership, viewership, online traffic, ratings points, and ad exposure—all of which gives the discourse an undeserved air of gravitas and moral authority.

Regardless of the media or entertainment, on the surface, the purpose of this cinematic mode of discourse in the public arena is less about confronting the problems and resolving the cynicism of governmental impotence than about replicating that self-important sense of feeling better—which happens in the movie theatre. Ironically, it is film, according to Žižek (2006, p. 343), that permits us to 'discern the hidden obverse of the much-praised American individualism and self-reliance: the secret awareness that we are all helplessly thrown around by forces out of our control.'[72]

Nostalgia in film is a powerful force. In a sense, it brings us 'closer' to the past, producing what Cook (2005, p. 2) sees as 'a kind of second-hand testimony that includes the audience as witnesses to reconstructed events.' These filmic experiences can create lasting memories in us—to the point that we can often believe that we have witnessed something 'real.'[73] As Cook points out: 'These postmodern histories,

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[72] Žižek (1997/2005, online) extensively discusses various films for the unique twists given to violent and impotent *passages à l' acte*: 'Today, with the global American ideological offensive, the fundamental insight of movies like John Ford's [1956] *Searchers* and *Taxi Driver* [Scorsese, 1976] is more relevant than ever: we witness the resurgence of the figure of the "quiet American," a naïve benevolent agent who sincerely wants to bring democracy and Western freedom to the Vietnamese—it is just that his intentions totally misfire, or, as Graham Greene put it: "I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused." So Freud was right in his prescient analysis of Woodrow Wilson, the U.S. president who exemplifies the American humanitarian interventionist attitude: the underlying dimension of aggression could not escape him.'

[73] A good example is *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994) in the way it successfully uses digital media techniques to 'inject' Forrest (Tom Hanks) into actual historic footage.

which are events in themselves, rely on empathy and identification to create memories that are not based on first-hand experiences, but which nevertheless have a powerful emotional affect' (ibid.). We also tend to remember what we see in movies, and, in this sense, films serve as cultural archives of social memories—'memories' that can be viewed repeatedly, reinterpreted, and analysed from a variety of perspectives, thus making them an extremely informative resource for critical discourse analysis.

Nostalgia also serves as a cultural practice in its ability to 'collapse' time and space, a phenomenon that occurs in all of the films, aside from *The Truman Show*, included in this study. Indeed, nostalgia acts with 'the power to flatten distinctions, to blur genres, to unname the practices of the social' (Stewart, K., 1998, p. 227). And in the postmodern world, culture is 'more and more unspoken and unnamed. Painted onto the surface of things, it passes us by as a blur of images and we "read" it instantaneously as if it is a photographic image already "written" and framed' (ibid.). In fact, another aspect of postmodernism worth noting—and one that is clearly evident in *The Truman Show* in particular—is 'how the media, and media images and signs, are increasingly identified as key, if not the key, reality for the modern citizen' (Hill, 1998, p. 98). In short, if it's on TV, it must be real because it certainly *looks* believable.

Baudrillard (1983, p. 41) supports this idea in the way he sees 'a new social reproductive order based upon communication and the circulation of 'signs' that 'provides the basis for a new cultural condition.' For Baudrillard, 'we live in a world increasingly dominated by images and signs,' and these 'have become our primary reality' (ibid.). In fact, we now live, Baudrillard suggests, 'in a world of simulations, or hyperreality, which has no reality beyond itself,' to the point that 'it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real—all that we have access to are signs and simulations' (ibid.).[74] He even goes so far as to say that 'the cinema and TV are America's reality' (Baudrillard, 1988a, p. 104). And for Hill (1998, p. 98), 'it is television—given its continuous availability and presence within contemporary culture—that is most commonly associated with the postmodern condition.' This idea is clearly reflected in *The Truman Show*—a film about a television show that is about Truman's life—in which Truman himself represents

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[74] See also Baudrillard (1975).

one of Baudrillard's 'signs' because his entire life has been a media-induced 'simulation.'[75]

In addition, Gwenllian-Jones (2004, p. 83) elaborates on media-constructed, fictional realities, claiming that in the 'fantastic genres of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and speculative fiction, elaborate constructions of emphatically alternate realities are central narrative devices, meticulously imagined and described.'[76] The fictional worlds of fantasy films are, imaginatively, 'rendered explicit' (ibid., p. 92). Any 'gaps' or 'inconsistencies' in the 'fictional world' are 'smoothed out,' so to speak, through the use of 'creative interventions' (ibid.). Technological tools, for example, go a long way toward reconciling these inconsistencies, including computer-generated animation, sound design and music scoring.

For the reasons outlined before, we can summarise that the films chosen for this study are indeed postmodern. Furthermore, there is a current hypothesis about the postmodernity of cinema to consider, for as Friedberg (1993, p. 103) states: 'The cinema functions as a machine for virtual time.'[77] Friedberg also cites Huyssen (1986) who asserts that 'the cinema is, unlike all other art forms, posed to be "postmodern"' (ibid., p. 166). And Ghosh (2006, online) reminds us that it is natural that 'this postmodern condition is reflected in today's films, whether the director does that intentionally or not,' and that 'films are being produced consciously keeping the postmodern elements and using postmodern cinematic techniques.' After all, the popularity of postmodern films is due to the fact that 'they derive their basic

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[75] Pope (2007, online), citing Žižek (1999a, p. 361), claims: 'In the phenomenon of having one's existence recorded by webcams, TV confessionals, and/or reality TV shows, the true horror is of not being observed. It is almost as if people only feel as though they exist in being so recorded, in producing and being offered up to the gaze; one almost hysterically grounds one's existence in such iterative recordings.'

[76] Gwenllian-Jones (2004, p. 83) further explains: 'In literature [and films], the fantastic cosmologies…are not merely exotic backdrops to linear narrative events but vivid and dense semantic domains that saturate character, themes, action, and plot. In addition to furnishing atmosphere and the spatial dimensions that support the narrative, they also have dynamic functions, shaping characters' experiences, inflecting plotlines, and supporting intricate networks of cross-connections through which narrative events resonate.'

[77] According to Friedberg (1993, p. 103), film does this 'in three ways: first, as a theatrical "set piece," set in a period in the past or in the future; second, in its capacity, through montage, to elicit an elliptical temporality; and third, in its ability to be repeated, over time, imparting to each spectator a unique montage consciousness.'

elements from the hearts of…postmodern people' (ibid.). Simply put, postmodern people want to see postmodern films even as much as they continue to see films, for example, from the 1940s and 1950s that, in particular, incorporated readily recognised character types and plot lines allowing moviegoers (then and now) to connect what they saw in the theatre to the larger world (e.g. World War II and the postwar period).

Films such as *Back to the Future* and *Peggy Sue Got Married* are 'symptomatic of [the] anxiety about time and the loss of history' (ibid.) and thus, they are postmodern in this respect. Clearly, we live in a postmodern world, and the cinema and television continue to shape our lifestyles and attitudes. By their very nature, films simulate a 'hyper-real' world. They 'pretend' to show us 'real' life. And they are often quite successful in luring us in to temporarily 'accepting' and 'believing' in this world.

On the other hand, Denzin (1991, p. 10) makes a valid argument that contemporary films are more likely to perpetuate 'modernist impulses…punctuated by periodic postmodern breaks with the past.' For example, *Pleasantville* certainly invokes 'a nostalgia for earlier films, while presenting a mix of pastiche and parody' and locating 'the viewer in a perpetual present where the signifiers from the past…circulate alongside advanced technologies and modern conveniences' (ibid.). However, Denzin leaves the account incomplete by excluding those external elements of the open-ended, unpredictable social world(s) that would suggest a more adequate analysis of the comprehensive, complex semiotic, social, and materially over-determined world(s). In fantasy films, potentially subversive effects may be so subtly manifested in carefully layered textures and texts that we must avoid the tendency to take orders of discourses, systems and symbols, language, and semantic and semiotic effect-generating factors for granted. The six films selected are all postmodern because they 'mock contemporary social formations and myths' such as the 'family, science, love, intimacy, the middle class' by 'confronting the viewer' (ibid.) with de-centered characters trying to make sense of their fantastic, postmodern realities.

Thus, all of the films examined in this study are, in fact, 'fantastic,' and they all contain sufficient elements which demand a comprehensive integrative analysis (e.g. the 'power behind the discourse')—nostalgia for the past, de-centered

individuals, compression and/or collapse of space and time, etc.—in order to be considered postmodern texts. All of these factors also provide the protagonists with the necessary motivation and conviction to act 'creatively,' as Fairclough would suggest, to escape their fantastic, postmodern situations. For example, in order to avoid a complete psychological breakdown, Truman leaves the exemplar of the solipsistic community—Seahaven—and steps triumphantly through the door at the end of the film. The overarching uncertainty, however, remains because no one knows for sure if indeed the reality that awaits Truman on the other side of the door is any better than what he had in the past.

2.3 Reaganism in Contemporary American Fantasy Films

Only if we begin to understand just how potentially harmful the Reagan myth has been in our recent national discourse, can we then move closer to a holistic understanding of our history beyond the normative roles ascribed to the Reagan legacy. Rethinking that legacy is one goal of Eugene Jarecki's recent (2011) biographical film about Reagan, which premiered just a few weeks before the official celebration of the late president's centenary. Jarecki (2008, online), who has written books and films about the nation's war efforts past and present, explains:

> At a time when we are mired in a tragic foreign conflict invented by his latter-day acolytes and digging through the wreckage of their corrupt and deregulated economy, the fullness of Reagan's vision is upon us. But if there can be any silver lining to these combined crises, it may be to inspire a shift away from America's blind obsession with Reaganism and a return to the more sober politics that once kept America secure—militarily and fiscally.

Despite the corrective intent of Jarecki and others concerned about the popularised myths of Reaganism, the nation's populace is more likely to remember the myth of the 1950s as perpetuated within the artifice of the Reagan legacy that has been ingrained into the public psyche. As a result, lost to immediate access is the memory of an unresolved, questioning, skeptical postwar decade (1950s) where the issues of civil rights, the nation's newfound status as a global superpower, television's growing presence, and the emergence of rock music and other forms of

individualised cultural expression seeded the tender roots of the unrest and turbulence that would be played out so visibly by the late 1960s and well into the 1970s.

Regarding the six films in this study, many critics offered their own variations on the common theme of how hammering the Reagan legacy into the national psyche has produced some disturbing side effects, especially an historical amnesia that is compromising Americans' capacity for remembering clearly the events and personalities for periods stretching further and further back in U. S. history. For example, Kinder's (1989) analysis of *Back to the Future* rightly shows how the troubled and contentious landscape of politics during Reagan's presidential tenure, as represented in the film's Oedipal conflict and its reaffirming faith in the future's potential, has been etched onto Americans' daily realms of domestic life, family, and work.

Similarly, Nadel (1997) makes a worthy comparison between Reagan, a former Hollywood actor with a homespun gift for storytelling in his presidential speeches, and *Back to the Future*, for their equal success in tampering with the 'time-space continuum' to negotiate a storyline that improvises a political narrative about happiness and comfort. They also reflect the quintessential command which today's generation of neoconservatives has maneuvered to obscure the prima facie evidence of the 1980s. Even Bick (1990), who prefers to see time in *Back to the Future* as a psychic/psychological developmental issue rather than as a political dynamic, acknowledges the firmly entrenched practice of reconstituting a historical narrative that appears to dominate this film as well as others produced during and after Reagan's presidency.

Peggy Sue Got Married, which reaffirms the notion of traditional marriage and the nuclear family, as a 1980s Hollywood youth narrative, is evidence of the impossibility of an 'oppositional cinema' (Wood, 2003, p. 333) during the Reagan era. The film also serves as a conservative artifact 'that, like the New Right, used fictional versions of family life in the 1950s to support the perception of a "crisis in the American family" and a loss of family values in the 1980s and 1990s' (Connors, 2005, online). Within this paradox, however, lies a more complex, subtle structure of the engagement between the 1980s rhetoric with nostalgic narratives exemplified by the 1950s. There are, as Fairclough (2001) would suggest, plenty of imaginary

discourses in *Peggy Sue Got Married* that suggest how we make sense of the choices faced when presented with an opportunity.

Regarding *The Family Man*, Kornbluh (2004), Martin-Jones (2006), and Hicks (2003) compellingly explain how manipulating the time-space continuum can rehabilitate the chastened capitalist into the admirable image of a 'family man,' much like Reagan, who emerges intact through the crises of conscience and conflict brought about by recessions, threats to the traditional nuclear family, and uncertainties about the value of American patriotism. Far less threatening and much less willing to traverse the anarchistic territory briefly touched upon in *Pleasantville*, which was released two years earlier, *The Family Man* is a feel-good fantasy that could leave middle-class suburban families and single career-minded individuals with positive messages without the tensions and burdensome costs of intervening moral elements, which ultimately would overshadow making easy decisions.

With *Pleasantville*, Grainge (2003, p. 203) argues that discursively, 'the film intervenes in political debates about the status of the 1960s, reclaiming the decade as a positive metaphor against the (supposedly) more reactionary "memories" as portrayed in such films as *Forrest Gump*.' He sees *Pleasantville* as inscribing a competing vision 'of the past through an economy of representational retro' (ibid.). Few films conceivably have captured more clearly the contradictory visions of life in America's suburbs as has *Pleasantville*, particularly when the film's use of colour is examined through the lens of how Reagan effectively channeled the anger of white mainstream Americans against racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, feminists, taxes, governmental bureaucracy, and advocates of affirmative action. Like *Back to the Future*, *Pleasantville* does attempt to recreate the past through its use of 'recycled' media memories of the 1950s, just as Reagan tried to 'recycle' the collective memories of 1950s America during his presidency.

Big allows us to consider the cultural 'idea' of childhood and family, as well as an America coming toward the end of the Reagan era—a country that now seemed to be 'struggling to come to grips with the gap between the images of a nation returning to its traditions, and the capitalistic greed that marked the 1980s' (Overpeck, 2007, p. 193). Josh's predicament reflects the struggle that America faced in the 1980s as it tried to 'accommodate new social realities at odds with traditional family values' (ibid.). However, from Todorov's perspective, we can see

how Josh's pre-Oedipal childishness sets up the film in part as an anti-Reagan text and criticism of the unregulated capitalistic fervor that emerged during the 1980s Reagan era. Regarding *Big*'s ambivalence in iconic representations of manhood and masculinity as Reaganism would define them, we can see both the restoration of pro-Reagan family order as well as the feelings, hesitations, and stigmas attached to the respectability of that pro-Reagan ordered, stable manhood.

The iconic stagecraft which defined the Reagan presidency echoes on an even larger scale in *The Truman Show*, reflecting both the mythic aspects of Reagan's America (Troy, 2005a, p. 13) and 'the spectacle of artificial, technically-designed and simulated realities as true life' (Huang, 2007, online), which has continued to propel the Reagan legacy-building machine more than seven years after his death in 2004. I broaden all of these aspects to show how the not-so-innocent project of manufacturing the Reagan legacy can scramble historical memory to the extent that many Americans will fail to acknowledge and understand the more frightening and sinister triggers and outcomes of the alienating culture wars that were aggressively stoked during his presidency.

With this in mind, let us now turn to Chapter 3, the first case study of *Back to the Future*, in which the film is examined as a postmodern/nostalgic fantasy text as well as a vehicle that covertly promotes 1980s-style Ronald Reagan ideology.

Chapter 3:
Case Study #1 of *Back to the Future*

3.1 Introduction

This case study will examine *Back to the Future* as a subversive postmodern fantasy text in two ways. First, in the 'decenteredness' of Marty McFly who, as a 'typical' American teenager of the 1980s, experiences a unique reversal of the Oedipus conflict. Second, in its ability to 'reawaken' American metaphors of history as reflected in Ronald Reagan's 'Morning in America' campaign theme, and in his role as grandfather-protector of classical American individualism.

Marty is accidentally sent back to 1955 in a plutonium-powered DeLorean time machine invented by his eccentric scientist friend, Dr. 'Doc' Emmett Brown. Unfortunately, Doc got the plutonium from Libyan[78] terrorists who wanted him to build a nuclear bomb. Realising that they have been betrayed, the terrorists find and shoot Doc, apparently killing him. In his effort to escape the same fate, Marty flees the scene in Doc's DeLorean and, after reaching the required speed for time travel, he finds himself in his hometown of Hill Valley, in 1955, where he enlists the aid of Doc Brown to find a way to get back to the future. However, the only way to power the time machine is to harness the power from a bolt of lightning that hits the clock tower in the town square. But before doing so, Marty must make sure that his teenage parents—George McFly and Lorraine Baines—fall in love so that they will eventually get married and have children, thereby ensuring Marty's existence. Marty

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[78] The 'Libyan' terrorists are actually wearing Saudi headdresses, nor are they speaking the Libyan dialect of Arabic. However, the fact that they are being portrayed as 'Libyan' terrorists cannot be overlooked because it reflects the socio-political climate of the mid-eighties in which this film was made. More importantly, the influence of Ronald Reagan's presidency can be seen here for as Palmer (1993, p. 14) points out, 'the eighties is also a decade of strong political consciousness especially on an international stage. The intrusion of worldwide terrorism exported from Iran, Libya, South America, even Russia, within the always perceived safe boundaries of the continental United States planted seeds of paranoia in American society.' Thus, in a fantasy film that seems to be as politically benign as *Back to the Future*, the generally white, middle-class community of Hill Valley is suddenly intruded upon by gun-wielding Libyan terrorists who are portrayed as simple killing machines who murder Doc in cold blood. However, Doc did, in fact, steal plutonium from them, but the American audience will focus on the fact that the Libyans wanted Doc to build them a bomb so that they could stage a nuclear attack on American soil.

is also given the opportunity to transform George from a spineless wimp into a strong, confident, and successful father figure, prevent Lorraine from becoming an overweight alcoholic with a brother in jail, and turn his future siblings into successful members of society as well.

Back to the Future 'argues that one can travel back in time to the years when [one's] parents were teenagers, and [one can] straighten them out right at the moment when they needed help the most' (Ebert, 1985, online). Marty is able to achieve this through time travel, which moves the film into Todorov's (1975) notion of the fantastic.[79] In addition, because the perception of the future is pertinent to this discussion, Bick (1990) is applicable here as well because implicit in the passage of time is the recognition that the adolescent, once a small child frustrated in the Oedipal drama by his immaturity, now approaches the adult ideal of mature potency.[80] While the adolescent need no longer wait in real time, the internalisation of superego prohibitions mandates that the child must forever wait for a future, which shall never come.

But how does this relate to Marty? Bick (1990, pp. 592-593) claims that: 'As a metonym for the oedipal introjects constituting his superego, time itself becomes Marty's preoccupation, his relentless pursuer, and representative of his defiance against the oedipal father.'[81] Marty seems to be stuck in what Bick describes as a kind of adolescent 'limbo.'[82] Bick's point is important because Back to the Future

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[79] Due to the patriarchal and Oedipal discussion that will follow in this chapter, we should keep in mind Jackson's (1981) supplement of Todorov's analytical approach with the consideration of psychoanalytical theory and profound unconsciousness (See Chapter 2).

[80] As Loewald (1962, p. 265) stipulates: 'The superego functions from the viewpoint of a future ego, from the standpoint of the ego's future which is to be reached, is being reached, is being failed or abandoned by the ego.'

[81] For example, 'Marty is constantly late for school despite the fact that he is always caught by Strickland, who functions as an externalization of the punitive and rigid superego (cf. Loewald, 1962).' Indeed, '[s]everal times in the film, Marty is shown shaking his watch and checking the time' (Bick, 1990, p. 606).

[82] Bick (1990, p. 606) explains: 'As the image of the immutable clock tower implies, Marty is stalled in psychic development and psychic time. This stagnation extends to Marty's use of the Time Machine. When he discovers himself marooned in the past, Marty asserts to Doc that he believes there to be something wrong with the Time Machine's starter. At critical moments in the film (e.g., when Marty must return to present time or when he attempts to save Doc from the Libyans), he literally cannot start the machine. In the first instance, Marty's difficulty is a metaphor for the perils an adolescent faces in his separation from primitive introjects; in the second, such

asks us to suspend belief and enter the fantastic not once, but twice: when Marty first sees Doc Brown's plutonium-powered DeLorean time machine deliver Doc's dog, Einstein, one minute into the future and return him to the present, and second, when Marty finds himself in Hill Valley in 1955.

In the first instance, the scene seems more science fiction than true fantasy. Marty and Doc meet in the parking lot of a shopping mall, and Doc in his Devo[83] suit looks like a space traveler. While the DeLorean time machine is most certainly an object of fantasy, we can see it more as a 'believable' space vehicle—particularly because audiences by now (i.e. the middle 1980s) were becoming accustomed to space shuttle flights. However, it is when Marty enters Hill Valley in 1955 that we truly enter the fantastic, for it is here that we must either 'accept' or 'reject' Marty's predicament. However, due to the hypothetical viewer's innate longing to return to and experience the past—particularly the deceptively 'innocent' Eisenhower years of the 1950s—it becomes quite easy for us to accept this fantastic situation.

It almost feels like we would not want Marty to succeed in his quest to return to 1985 because life seems so much better in 1955, an era 'more colorful and vibrant than its bland, more capitalistic successor' (Koller, 2001, online). The film also appeals to a commonly shared fantasy of the capability to look back in time and see what one's parents were like when they were young. Much like the films in the 1950s, *Back to the Future* provides, in a sense, larger-than-life characters in larger-than-life scenes not only as an escapist platform of entertainment, but also as a framework for understanding the sociopolitical appeal of nostalgia, its strategic advantages, and its subtly embedded shortcomings.

Back to the Future successfully embraces 1950s and 1980s culture simultaneously, but it also pokes fun at their differences. And perhaps Michael J. Fox best represents a 1980s Reagan-era 'preppy,' just as he did in his role as Alex Keaton in the popular 1980s American sitcom, *Family Ties* (Goldberg, 1982-1989), which pitted Alex's conservative, Republican mindset against his liberal, Democrat

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stagnation appears to be a reaction-formation against aggression directed toward the oedipal father.'

[83] Devo was a popular American punk/new wave/rock group that is often credited with inventing the 'synth-pop' sound of the 1980s. Their music and stage shows utilised kitsch science fiction themes, including their futuristic space suit uniforms.

parents.[84] Marty 'embodies many things that the 1950s just aren't ready for, some of which he exploits for his own purposes—such as the rampant fear of alien invasions'[85] (Leo, 2005, online). However, Marty also embodies the average, everyday protagonist—an increasingly common element in many 1950s science fiction films in which alien invaders often showed up as anti-nuclear, Cold War allegorical metaphors.

While taking into account the conveniently accessible landscape of popular optimism often used to describe the decade, we can see how Marty is compelled to deal directly with the territory that was just as prominent in these 1950s' films: the fear, paranoia, uncertainty, and existentialistic dread reflecting the potentially catastrophic partnership of science and technology. For example, when Marty crashes into the Peabody's barn in 1955, wearing a suit that looks remarkably similar to a spacesuit, and when Marty poses as Darth Vader[86] in order to 'scare' George into asking Lorraine to the school dance. The reference to Vader is effective for its easily recognisable context as the quintessential villain of fantasy.[87]

Furthermore, as Marty's parents tend to 'look back on their childhoods as an idyllic time of innocence,' the 1950s presented here seem 'like an even more bizarre world in which to live, with its naivety, repressiveness, and denial' (Leo, 2005, online). While the U.S. economy marked a sharp uprise in the post-WWII 1950s, with more jobs, the expansion into the suburbs, and the resulting baby boom marked

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[84] Many American youths were particularly drawn to Reagan. On many college campuses, Young Republicans chapters were formed with a great deal of energy and participation. In fact, we could say that many Reaganites in the national government at the time were not much older than Fox's character in *Family Ties*.

[85] According to Hardin (1997, online): 'Fredric Jameson [1992, p. 96] ties the entire genre of 1950s science fiction film[s] to Cold War paranoia: "Arguably, the golden age of the fifties Science Fiction film…testified to a genuine collective paranoia, that of the fantasies of the Cold War period."'

[86] Darth Vader is a fictional character from the popular George Lucas *Star Wars* films of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

[87] In fact, on the American Film Institute's list of 100 greatest villains, Darth Vader ranked third, only behind Hannibal Lecter, the psychotic killer played by Anthony Hopkins in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991), and Norman Bates, the demented hotel operator played by Anthony Perkins in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), but ahead of other quintessential fantastic antagonists such as the Wicked Witch of the West (Margaret Hamilton) from *The Wizard of Oz*, and the humanoid robot from *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984). See 'AFI's 100 Heroes & Villains.' [online] Available at: http://www.afi.com/tvevents/100years/handy.aspx [Accessed 04 March 2009].

by consumerism, the decade also saw the relative repression of the women's rights and civil rights movements, the Korean War, the Cold War, and McCarthyism. Just underneath its nostalgic veneer, 1950s America was anything but 'the good old days.'[88]

3.2 Oedipus Reversed: The Son Restores the Father

Clearly, Marty McFly has much to feel 'decentered' about: the most obvious reason being the fact that he has traveled 30 years back in time, from 1985 to 1955. But Marty was also somewhat 'decentered' before making his trip to the past: his band has been rejected, he doesn't have his own car, and he feels completely detached from his dysfunctional family. Marty's decenteredness peaks when he realises that his own teenage mother 'has the hots for' him.

Marty is indeed a postmodern character—a male who transgresses 'moral boundaries' but comes 'back home to mother and father with [his] Oedipal conflicts resolved' (Denzin, 1991, p. 79). *Back to the Future* reflects a common trend in 1980s Reaganite-American cinema, which, according to Kinder (1989, p. 4): 'is the restoration of the family to its former status as a strong Ideological State Apparatus and the reinstatement of the father within this patriarchal stronghold.' Kinder sees *Back to the Future* as typical of many films produced during the Reagan era,[89] and her analysis goes more broadly and deeply than Denzin's. However, she still avoids some of the indirect, subtly manifested subversive elements present in *Back to the Future*, although not to the extent as other films in this study. In the immediate post-Reagan era, a more direct challenge of the idealised version of the 1950s arises in *Pleasantville*, where the protagonists seem less focused on changing the past than with creating a reflexive, contemplative engagement of the 1950s, and where the

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[88] See Finkelstein (1999, 2005).

[89] According to Kinder (1989, p. 4): 'Like a pastoral of the eighties, these films address America's economic and moral decline and our…sense of powerlessness by regressing to a personal past. They take us back not to the western frontier (where both the lone killer and the questioning of progress are now politically problematic) but to the onset of puberty where the oedipal conflict begins to be resolved and where we can still affirm faith in the future. The troubling world of politics is displaced onto the domestic worlds of family and business.'

questions of whether those times were better are left open-ended for us to imagine and craft our own interpretations.

Back to the Future, like Reagan's presidency, tries to restore a sound and prosperous future to the American family by asking us to forget (or perhaps pretend it never happened) the financial, moral, and emotional troubles that have plagued the country since its defeat in Vietnam. The shift in tone and mood—morally, culturally, and politically—had yet to manifest itself fully. A decade later, mainstream films—such as *Pleasantville*—reflected in part the creative response to the culture wars coming to a peak during the Clinton impeachment crisis, fomented by the political dialogue and discourse pitting a liberal president against a conservative Congress, which owed its electoral success to the Reagan legacy.

However, in the 1980s, even amid the attempts to create fresh, sanitised memories of the past, an interesting Freudian analysis of *Back to the Future* is possible, focusing on the Oedipal nature of the narrative. For Elsaesser and Buckland (2002), the film reverses the 'normal' incest taboo. In the film, it becomes 'dream-like' as Marty rejects his mother Lorraine's advances while trying to make more of a 'man' of his father George. Normally, we would expect to find the exact opposite: a strong and powerful father/authority figure accompanied by a passive, but femininely alluring mother figure. Instead, Marty encounters George who is 'singularly inept, bullied, and immature…unsuitable as a paternal authority, too weak to even rebel against, but fit to pity and despise' (p. 227). Throughout the film, George allows himself to be bullied by Biff (Thomas F. Wilson), both in high school and later as his boss. Surely, George is not the kind of father figure a boy could or would want to look up to and admire.

Marty's mother, meanwhile, is no better as a parent, especially when compared to the matronly portrayals found in the popular entertainment of that era. Instead of June Cleaver (Barbara Billingsly),[90] the archetypical suburban mother in

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[90] Curiously, an online Harris Interactive Poll of 2,529 U.S. adult males indicated that she is still the mother they would most like to have, followed by Claire Huxtable (Phylicia Rashad) of *The Cosby Show* (Cosby, Leeson and Weinberger, 1984-1992), Carol Brady (Florence Henderson) of *The Brady Bunch* (Schwartz, S., 1969-1974), Marion 'Mrs. C' Cunningham (Marion Ross) of *Happy Days* (Marshall, G., 1974-1984), and finally Donna Stone of *The Donna Reed Show* (Roberts, W., 1958-1966). 'For Mother's Day: June Cleaver is the Television Mom Americans Would Have Liked to Have Growing Up.' *The Harris Poll #53* (07 May 2008). [online] Available

the American television series, *Leave it to Beaver* (Connelly, Conway and Mosher, 1957-1963), we find a sloppily-dressed, overweight housewife who swills vodka at breakfast and acts like a prude, trying to prevent her kids from showing any interest in the opposite sex. In contrast, whenever any trouble or concerns arose with the boys, Wally (Tony Dow) and Beaver (Jerry Mathers), June Cleaver would diligently defer to the father/husband Ward (Hugh Beaumont), who had the requisite wisdom to resolve the matter. It was always he who provided the solution to the problem. Thus, she was the ideal 1950s mother and housewife—a woman who never did anything but acquiesce with her husband's decisions or demeanor in dealing with a situation. The Cleaver model is conspicuously absent in the un-rehabilitated McFly household. In appearance, Lorraine is certainly not the quintessential housewife. However, she is also unlike Cleaver, not particularly needing to wait for her husband to offer his opinion authoritatively. On the other hand, she seems utterly resigned to the lack of stability and order in her dysfunctional family, in which Marty is clearly appalled to be a member.

Furthermore, Marty has very limited options for a male role model, and because his greatest fear is becoming a loser like his father, his only real option is Doc. However, Marty does not want to 'emulate the asocial' Doc Brown, nor does he want to be like Biff, the 'anti-social…authority figure' (Elsaesser and Buckland, 2002, p. 228). Thus, Marty's only salvation seems to be his girlfriend, the 'sight for sore eyes,' Jennifer (Claudia Wells). In fact, Jennifer becomes the 'Oedipal "substitute" for his mother' (ibid.), but Marty is unable to consummate his relationship with her.[91] Even at the end of the film, when all seems well, Marty and Jennifer are interrupted by Doc who has returned to warn them about their children who are in trouble: 'It's your kids, Marty. Something has gotta be done about your kids.'

Back to the Future thus presents us with a unique situation in which the 'traditional' Oedipal conflict is turned on its head. As a result, the narrative strives to restore a 'proper' heterosexual Oedipal identity. Marty's travel back to a time

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at: http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=907 [Accessed 26 July 2008].

[91] First, their attempts at intimacy are interrupted by the 'save the clock tower' woman; and second, because Biff has wrecked the family car, Marty is unable to take Jennifer on an overnight trip to the lake.

preceding his own birth allows him to both realise the Oedipus incest fantasy and witness Freud's 'primal scene.'[92] And once Marty discovers that he has traveled back in time to 1955, he is able to use his knowledge of the future 'not to change history, but to make (his) history possible' (ibid., p. 228). Thus the film, 'having posed the problem of Oedipus in terms of a lack of a credible father figure…is the perfect wish-fulfilling fantasy' (ibid.). Why? Because now that Marty has considerably more 'normal' and successful parents—George is a best-selling author and Lorraine is his now slim, attractive, loving wife—he 'can face up to the Oedipal challenge' and 'emerge as a fully constituted male' (ibid., p. 229). This ultimately allows Marty to pursue a heterosexual bond with Jennifer and eventually have children. In the process, he moves away from being a 'decentered' postmodern figure to a more 'centered' individual with a seemingly bright future. In doing so, Marty temporarily leaves the postmodern world.

Sarah Harwood (1997, p. 75) takes a somewhat more pessimistic view by claiming that the film 'posits an omnipresent, omnipotent proto-father, Marty, who is able to intervene across generations.' In doing so, Marty creates a 'timeless, and therefore "permanent" solution' as well as 'a metafather in the figure of Dr. Emmet Brown,' the 'magical mentor' whose time machine inadvertently allows him to access 'his omnipotent status' (ibid.). For Harwood, the fact that Marty is able to transform so completely his inadequate father, but also, at the same time, being sired by him is contradictory.

In addition, Lorraine's attempts to seduce Marty, her future son, results in Marty becoming a 'protofather' who is unable to 'simply create a new family' because his McFly family is 'scarred by generational history, which cannot be relinquished' because the 'sins of the fathers may be revisited upon the sons' (ibid.). However, the contradiction must be explored further. While Harwood acknowledges that Marty is successful in transforming his 'loser' family, he is obviously less successful with his own because as we have already seen, Doc suddenly returns to take Marty and Jennifer into the future to deal with a crisis involving their own children. Therefore, my analysis suggests that Marty is not omnipotent because he

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[92] The fantasy of witnessing the moment of one's conception, i.e. the act of parental lovemaking.

seems to be repeating the same mistakes as his father did in the past in creating his restored family of the future.

In taking Harwood's analysis one step further, *Back to the Future* can be viewed as a postmodern text in the 'schizophrenic' father figure of George as well. It is not only Marty who is 'decentered' in this film, for George is a father for whom 'the boundaries of temporal reality and subjectivity are completely eroded' (ibid. 93). It is Marty's desire to have an attractive, successful family that causes George's 'schizoid' state. It also is George's failure as a father figure that drives the narrative and forces Marty to intervene. To achieve this, Marty—in a sense—becomes a father figure himself as he attempts to 'coach' George on how to ask Lorraine to the school dance and 'rescue' her from the brutish Biff. Certainly, without Marty's constant encouragement and instruction, George would be paralysed to act—unable to take the necessary steps to enter into a relationship with Lorraine. Instead, he would forever be the peeping Tom in the tree, gazing at Lorraine from afar through his binoculars.

Again, it is worthwhile taking Harwood's analysis one step further. It is not only George whom Marty is able to work his 'magic' on. He is also able to transform his mother Lorraine 'into a utopian model of maternal virtue and energy' (ibid., p. 93). For example, by meeting his mother as a teenager, he is able to warn her about her future drinking problem. In this scene, the irony of the situation is overwhelming. Instead of the heavy-drinking prude at the beginning of the film, Marty now has to deal with the fact that not only is his teenage mother open to 'breaking the rules,' she is also more than willing to be promiscuous. However, Lorraine's 'unwitting seduction of her son…is recuperated through her transformation from slovenly, nagging mother to perfect, home-making wife' (ibid. p. 109). Thus, Marty succeeds in transforming his father and mother, driven by his desire to not only ensure that he is born, but also to create a better version of his previous family.

Some scholars have explored the myth-making dynamics of the Reagan presidency. Troy (2005b, online), for example, writes about how Reagan 'invented' the 1980s.[93] When Reagan ran for reelection in 1984, his campaign message was 'Morning in America,'[94] and there is profound irony embedded in this message. In the United States, the phrase, 'morning in America,' has now become part of the lexicon often used to refer to a situation that has changed for the better, or when it becomes the pretext for dramatically improving the circumstances in a current situation. However, at the time, Reagan's message was completely different. He was running for reelection in 1984 and he wanted to reassure voters that things were good, so there was no reason to change the nation's leadership.

The myth-making process also shaped the role of science in the Reagan doctrine during the 1980s. Likewise, in the film, Doc's portrayal as Marty's scientific mentor also is a sharply finessed hybrid of the mad scientist and the rational scientist, both particularly common to the genre of 1950s' science fiction and fantasy films. In addition, there were interlaced cultural and political parallels to the Reagan doctrine of the 1980s that fueled Cold War anxieties about the Soviet Union's intentions, and the need for a strong nuclear-based national defense. In some films from the 1950s, the scientist is portrayed in a villainous blush willing to

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[93] Troy (2005b, online) relates the myth of the decade as follows: 'The most prevalent myth about the 1980s is that Ronald Reagan somehow turned back the clock to the age of Ozzie and Harriet. Reagan in fact led Americans "Back to the Future," as the popular movies from the 1980s suggested. Reagan's brand of easy listening nationalism and feel good consumerist libertinism reassured many Americans, and conjured up warm nostalgic feelings while pushing the nation forward politically and culturally, for better and worse.'

[94] The following is the text of the ad: 'It's morning in America. Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history. With interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon, 6,500 young men and women will be married, and with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future. It's morning in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?' [online] Available at: http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/candidates/ad.archive/reagan_morning.mov [Accessed 27 July 2008].

sacrifice anything for the sake of science.[95] However, in other films, the scientist is a rational being.[96] In the sobering reality of a political world, scientists—then and in the 1980s—knew that governments often overshadowed their voices of explanation and caution.[97]

Therefore, Doc is a cleverly imagined amalgam in the film: an odd-looking, wacky-behaving mentor safely tempered by his own well-intentioned boundaries, but yet capable of marshalling technology for fantastic use and effect. Fusing science fiction and comedy effectively, where getting the science right in a straightforward homage to the old-fashioned time travel story did not matter, the film incorporated more than 300 special effects uses—many of which were considered cutting edge at the time of the film's release. The abundant use of effects suggested just how easily one could repackage a distant period with enormous popular appeal.

Furthermore, Doc's car as a time machine is also quite significant. First, because it represents a technological achievement that is 'codified' and 'celebrated' (Nadel, 1997, p. 12) in Ronald Reagan's two terms in office. Second, because *Back to the Future* is a film that targeted a teenage audience, for whom a car represents much more than just a vehicle in which to move from one location to another—it represents independence and freedom from one's past childhood. It serves as the conveyance that enables us to transport ourselves to a different realm, allowing us to drive simultaneously 'away from the past' and gaze 'backward at it' (Author's quotation marks). Reagan, in effect, was not just the 'Great Communicator,' but also the 'Great Protector' because he wanted to ensure and protect the iconic status of the American automobile in the national culture, particularly since the nation's

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[95] For example, *The Thing from Another World* (Nyby, 1951) and *Forbidden Planet* (Wilcox, 1956), in which the scientist Morbius (Walter Pidgeon) identifies with the alien civilisation and refuses to stop using the alien technology, despite its pronounced dangers to humans.

[96] Most notably, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Wise, 1951), in which the alien emissary Klaatu (Michael Rennie) insists on speaking with a group of scientists instead of representatives from the government. Likewise, in *It Came From Outer Space* (Arnold, 1953), the protagonist is an astronomer, the only person in the town capable of saving his fellow citizens, who, in the meantime, are driven to self-destructive acts by a fear-mongering sheriff.

[97] In the formative years of the Atomic Age, scientists had split into two camps: J. Robert Oppenheimer, Niels Bohr, and Albert Einstein as cautionary figures, and others such as Enrico Fermi and Edward Teller as fervent spokesmen for the government's defense. See Masters and Way (2007).

economic power was inextricably linked to the automobile industry.[98] A time machine, like Reagan's presidency, distorts and manipulates 'reality': both succeed at creating 'a "natural" effect out of an "unnatural" process' (Wills, 1987, p. 372).

Reagan and *Back to the Future* are able to succeed because they share the power of cinema's ability to 'reshape' history and sway public opinion. Indeed, no president in U.S. history used the conventions of cinematic reality more extensively than Ronald Reagan. Both Reagan and *Back to the Future* proved that 'tampering with the space-time continuum was not dangerous but beneficial…it was…absolutely necessary for happiness and comfort' (Nadel, 1997, pp. 20-21), even if it meant bending the truth so much as to *rewrite* history. Clearly, Reagan worked his magic as America's favourite storyteller, improvising a narrative about the present and the future rooted in America's mythic past. Troy (2005a, p. 13) highlights the 'mythic past' aspect as follows: 'Reagan['s] storyline of decay and renaissance was all the more remarkable given its tenuous relationship to the truth. [His] two terms were not the eight-year idyll many now recall. Reagan's 'revolution'[99] was not as dramatic as many now claim, and the morning in America was not as cloud free.'[100] Troy's analysis is credible when we examine the historical record.

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[98] Needless to say, many economists would argue that consumers, in effect, were suffering from such overarching protectionist policies—hence, the contradiction. Still, it mattered mightily to many Americans that a domestic automaker lead the world in car sales.

[99] Reagan's revolution, according to official *The White House* website, refers to his attempts to 'reinvigorate the American people and reduce their reliance upon Government' [online] Available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/ronaldreagan [Accessed 22 August 2011].

[100] Troy (2005a, p. 13) continues: 'Even Reagan's poll ratings were not that consistently high. In particular, the Reagan recession of 1981 to 1982 generated the most unemployment since the Great Depression; midway through Reagan's first term, pundits were eulogizing yet another failed administration. Even at the height of the Reagan boom, serious questions lingered about the mounting debt, about the growing gap between rich and poor, about the fraying of Reagan's vaunted "safety net," about the threat of Japanese and German economic dominance. And even once Reagan's poll ratings recovered, pollsters consistently discovered far more affection for the man than support for his policies.'

Back to the Future reflects, in part, the catalysing response in the United States to the turmoil of the 1970s, namely the Vietnam War and Watergate.[101] And Palmer (1993) suggests that 1980s American society was only able to deal with and understand the past—namely the loss and turmoil caused by the Vietnam War and Watergate—by adopting 'intertextuality' to deal with the present. However, while *Back to the Future* represents a subtly critical counterpoint to the Reagan era, we need to be cautious about reading too much into Zemeckis's intentions. For example, the film contains a lot of product placement, which would suggest that it is no more than what is known in the United States as 'popcorn escapism.' Bick (1990) notes the fact that all three films in the *Back to the Future* series contain numerous references to actual products, such as Pepsi cola, Nike shoes, and the Pizza Hut restaurant chain. As a result, Bick claims: '*Back*'s "reality" is the only version that matters—it treats itself as if it were real or more real than the elements of which it is constituted' (ibid., p. 34).[102] Like a movie, Reagan's assurance that his economic policies would eventually lead to a balanced budget was completely illusionary. He asked the American people to be like moviegoers who, in pursuit of short-term rewards, accept the illusionary and illogical space-time continuum of film.

The Reagan references in the film are, in some respects, merely name checks, suggesting a political statement—and there are plenty of others that suggest substantive political statements—but this still raises the following issue: is the film more a product of its time rather than a statement of it? Indeed, the idealised presentation of the 1950s is intriguing and profoundly important, and a lot of it is done with a considerable amount of slyness and subtlety. However, was Zemeckis

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[101] Belton (2005, p. 375) cites Robin Wood (2003) who states that Vietnam and Watergate 'served to undermine public confidence in the nation's leaders. Reagan attempted to restore this lost confidence…by encouraging Americans to forget Watergate and to view Vietnam less as a national defeat than as a failure in American resolve to win, caused by a loss of faith in traditional American values. Reagan represented a restoration of those values.'

[102] Bick (1990, p. 340) further cites Britton (1986) who asserts: 'the ritual repetitiveness of Reaganite entertainment goes with its delirious, self-celebrating, self-reference…it is another factor distinguishing the conventions of these films from those of genre that they are primarily engaged in referring to themselves and other movies, and related media products, and in flattering the spectator with his or her familiarity with the forms and keepings of a hermetic entertainment "world"…Reaganite entertainment refers to itself in order to persuade us that it doesn't refer outwards at all.'

deliberative here or subconsciously—and perhaps accidentally—telescoping his own sociopolitical critique upon the film?

Hollywood played an important role in the production of futuristic films, such as *Back to the Future*, 'all of which turn on the premise that in order for the future to exist and continue, the past must be understood and even revised' (Palmer, 1993, pp. 12-13). Marty helps his father build a strong character, just as Reagan helped strengthen America's character. Furthermore, just as George caused Marty and his family shame, he, like Reagan, 'is turned into a father who can give his children just what they want—a well-rounded family and material success' (Jeffords, 1994, p. 71). While nostalgia for 1950s America is overtly present in the film, its political message is covert; that is, it is an 'unseen,' ideological element of the film. Just as Marty traveled back in time to recreate the 'ideal' father, so, too, did Ronald Reagan attempt to redefine his image as a caring, 'nurturing' father, one who is ready and capable of leading the nation to posthumous 'victory.'

For Jeffords (ibid., p. 80), the message of *Back to the Future* is clear: 'Change for personal gain is bad, but change for the improvement of the family— especially the father—is good.' Jeffords' point is worth exploring a bit further. In much the same way, Ronald Reagan asked Americans to 'change'—or rather forget—the country's past troubles and defeats and to put their trust and faith in the 'father' (Reagan himself) to repair and heal the country and reinstate the United States in its rightful place as the world's omnipotent world power. So when Marty responds to Mr. Strickland's (James Tolken) statement—'No McFly ever amounted to anything in the history of Hill Valley'—with: 'Yeah, well, history is gonna change,' not only does Marty succeed at making sure his parents meet, fall in love, and conceive himself and his siblings, his efforts transform his entire family, particularly his wimpy father, George. As a result, Strickland's insult, 'You're too much like your old man,' becomes a compliment rather than an insult.

Likewise, according to Jeffords, this can be accomplished by sending our heroes back 'to the time before things went wrong—before the Democrat's version of the Great Society took over the government—and reinvent the characters who would shape the future' (ibid., p. 70). Just as Marty set out to 'reinvent' and 'coach' his father, Reagan was successful at coaching America to stop being a 'wimp'— embodied in Jimmy Carter's presidency and succumbing to communism and Islamic

fundamentalism—to a nation that is both economically and socially successful on the international stage. It was also an effort that galvanised each of his four successors: George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and, ironically, Barack Obama. Even historians continue to reinvent the storytelling about that particular period. For example, Troy (2005a, p. 18) makes a compelling argument that Reagan wasn't after revisionism, calling the Reagan era a watershed.[103] Reagan, Troy argues, was more about conciliation than reformation. He wanted Americans to feel good about themselves, and it was okay to do so (especially after the equally contentious 1960s and 1970s).

Back to the Future also is simultaneously a reaffirmation and a critique of the postmodern American family.[104] Again, it is interesting to look at Marty's relationship with his father, George, and how it reflects what Jeffords (1994, p. 64) calls the 'key issue for manhood in the 1980s'—that is, 'the relationship between fathers and sons…whether actual…or symbolic.' In examining the film, we see that Marty finds success as a matchmaker through his plan to have George 'rescue' Lorraine from the brutish grip of Biff, thus reversing George's role as Biff's doormat. By saving Lorraine, dancing with her, and sealing their future with a kiss, George becomes a capable man in the future. He is now superior to Biff, socially and economically: a best-selling author, respected in his community, and a loving husband and father. All seems well with the McFly family, just as Reagan asked Americans to *believe* that all was well with American family values.[105] Like Reagan, Marty knows that his parents had not lived up to the dreams of that 1950s generation, so he works to restore the promise of those dreams.

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[103] Troy (2005a, p. 18) states: 'That this untrammeled individualism and resulting anomie came wrapped in a red-white-and-blue package, delivered by an old-fashioned gentlemen distinguished by his Midwestern courtliness and all-American idealism, accompanied by America's great cold war victory and the world's turn from flirting with socialism to appreciating capitalism, fed the clashing stereotypes and interpretive confusion. Yet in the 1980s it seemed to have reached the tipping point. After the social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, the process of decitizenization, if you will, seemed more ubiquitous, more blatant, less reversible.'

[104] Consider Neale's (2002, p. 232) remark that 'if "home" is a place that can only be realized by going somewhere else, then cinema becomes an important site in the 1980s for fashioning a relationship between baby boomers and their children, for *re-embodying* youth.'

[105] Clearly, Reagan 'often affirmed "the great civilized truths—values of family, work, neighborhood, and religion"' (Troy, 2005a, p. 204).

Back to the Future suggests that it is all right to change history if it is for the good of the father, for as Marty's journey makes clear, what is good for the father is good for the family. Likewise, the film reflects how Reagan believed that the dysfunctional 'American family' could be healed and transformed by remanufacturing history through rose-tinted glasses. However, we should keep in mind that Nancy Reagan was not the president's first and only wife. At the same time, Reagan was also asking Americans to *selectively* 'forget' the past[106]—in fact, it was an important part of his political philosophy.

As Reeves and Campbell (1994, p. 90) accurately state: 'The nostalgic orthodoxy of Reaganism vowed to "take back America."'[107] In this respect, *Back to the Future* 'quintessentializes the imaginary command of the past, the historical gymnastics, the arbitrary turnabouts of the Reagan Revolution' (Nadel, 1997, p. 66) more than any other film. Furthermore, the film is uncanny in its ability to reflect how 'Reagan gives our history the continuity of a celluloid Mobius strip. We ride the curves backward and forward at the same time, and he is always there' (Wills, 1987, p. 371). The evidence suggests that *Back to the Future* accurately reflects the way in which Reagan seems to move both forward and backward in time simultaneously, while attempting to both escape and forget, through selective amnesia and nostalgia, the non-corresponding historical truths of the past *and* the present.

Marty's time travel journey into the past, where he successfully reverses the Oedipal experience and creates a credible father figure, also fulfills Benjamin Franklin's ideal of the American male: 'You can achieve anything if your set your mind to it,' one of Doc Brown's often repeated maxims. However, Pfeil (1990) points out how the film promotes Reagan's politics of cynicism and nostalgia, which become apparent both in Doc's cynical remarks about Ronald Reagan in 1955,[108] and with Reagan's conservative agenda of rewriting the past in order to both justify and prolong the status quo.

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[106] Consider also Troy's (2005a) claim that Reagan also set the national mood to carry forward the social changes that began in the 1960s and 1970s.

[107] According to Reeves and Campbell (1994, p. 90), Reagan 'promised to take all of America back to the gilded age of a pre-Fordist, Horatio Alger enterprise culture…to take America back from the color-and-gender-coded "special interest groups" of the Keynesian welfare state.'

[108] Doc tells Marty: 'Then tell me, "future boy," who's president of the United States? …Ronald Reagan? The actor? Ha! Then who's the vice president, Jerry Lewis? I suppose Jane Wyman is the first lady!'

Pfeil sees the plot of *Back to the Future* as reactionary, because while the film follows the standard Oedipal identity and libidinal renunciation, it seems to believe in neither. However, Elsaessar and Buckland (2002, p. 234) criticise Pfeil's analysis because he does not address 'why time-travel should be necessary, or why rewriting [history] should become such a political issue.' Clearly, while Pfeil recognises the Reaganesque promotional elements of the film, he fails to fully explore the importance and implications of how *Back to the Future* so accurately reflects Reagan's attempts to 'change' America's history, and thereby create a more 'positive' image of the United States both at home and abroad.

The ambiguous yet symbolically-driven notion of change has become the prime essential component of every presidential election in modern American politics. In his 1980 presidential bid, Reagan, with the help of a savvy campaign staff, thoroughly understood how to position the message so that 'change' would achieve its effective meaning retroactively. All Reagan needed to do was to persuade people to identify with 'change.' Voters moved from proclaiming, 'I want change,' to an endorsement of 'I support change.' In fact, his successors—most notably, Clinton (1992) and Obama (2008)—made clear that the change American people need does not come from Washington, but *to* Washington. For change to occur along Reagan's standards, citizens become responsible for changing themselves as a society, and pressing those changes upon the federal government.

Corliss (1986b, p. 10) picks up Pfeil's line by suggesting that in the 1980s, Norman Rockwell's vision of America[109] was born again in the presidency of Ronald Reagan: 'The Eighties are the Fifties, and father knows best.'[110] Reagan most certainly found himself president at exactly the time America needed to be 'rescued' from what Troy (2005a, p. 12) calls, 'the sad tale of America in the 1960s and 1970s, a country demoralized, wracked by inflation, strangled by government, humiliated by Iranian fundamentalists, outmaneuvered by Soviet communists, betrayed by its best educated and most affluent youth.' In his role as America's new 'father,'

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[109] Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* covers in particular painted idealistic, sentimentalised portrayals of simple, everyday American life and family values.

[110] Corliss (1986b, p. 10) continues: 'Hardworking folks who really care. A-frame houses with manicured lawns, a freckle-faced paper boy romping with his cocker spaniel, the Lutheran church on Main Street…And no crime, lies, unseemly sex, or darkies who play their radios too loud. It's a lovely old world. Things must be simpler, warmer, better there.'

Reagan radiated with enthusiasm and great optimism that was summed up perfectly in a 1984 ad campaign 'celebrating "Morning again in America"' (ibid., pp. 14-15).[111] However, the following question is critical: Is the past that Marty enters *really* better than the present?

That is certainly the feeling we immediately get when Marty enters the 1955 version of Hill Valley. For example, we are taken aback by the sight of a full-service gas station, a scene that echoes that Rockwellian vision cited earlier. Virtually all of the segments from the 1950s come off as convincing period pieces. Dialogue is understated and restrained—even in the scenes with the bullying Biff—and even the minimal use of period music is effective in shaping the warmer tones one might expect from the 1950s. In the first scene when Marty is back in 1955, 'Mr. Sandman' (Ballard, 1954), a 1950s pop music hit performed by The Four Aces, is heard from a record store. When Marty walks into a diner, 'The Ballad of Davy Crockett' (Bruns and Blackburn, 1954), performed by Fess Parker, is playing on a Wurlitzer jukebox.[112] No further 1950s music is heard again until the pivotal scene at the dance. Yes, it certainly *feels* like the good old days, doesn't it?

However, in the Oedipal fantasy as played out in the film, and in such exchanges as those involving Doc and Marty, there are subtle therapeutic effects underlying the positivistic notions that potentially empower us to imagine other possibilities beyond the normative roles articulated in a Reaganite framework. The malleability of characters also extends to the fantastic possibilities of Oedipal relationships, allowing us to laugh and be entertained by potentially dangerous material and taboos, all while still remaining ensconced in the innocence of the film's protagonist, acting upon worthy, noble motives and being the mere victim of circumstances.

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[111] Troy (2005a, p. 19) goes on to make a very interesting point about the irony of Reagan's desire to 'confront the legacy of the 1960s,' while at the same time 'Reagan himself did not realize—and would never acknowledge—just how many aspects of the 1960s he and his comrades either aped or incorporated. From the way the conservative movement mimicked some of the 1960s' "movement culture," to the mainstreaming of granola and blue jeans, of Naderism and environmentalism, the 1980s did more to advance the sixties agenda, such as it was, than to dismantle it, especially culturally.'

[112] The iconic Wurlitzer jukebox is actually from the Big Band era of the 1940s. However, because they are so emblematic of jukeboxes in general, they are often used to invoke the 1950s rock and roll period in films and television.

That same sense of malleability, however, also allows wry, sarcastic commentary on socio-cultural shifts. For example, consider the scene in which Marty enters Lou's Café in 1955 and meets Goldie (Donald Fullilove), a black busboy who is trying to encourage George to stand up for himself and not let Biff and his goons continue to bully him. When Goldie announces that '…one day, I'm gonna be somebody!' Marty exclaims: 'That's right! He's gonna be mayor!' But Lou (Norman Alden) is quick to point out: 'A colored mayor. That'll be the day.' Here, we can both hear and see discrimination and racism from an historical perspective. Leap forward to 1985 and Goldie *is* mayor of Hill Valley, which is now considerably dirtier and shabbier than the prosperous shiny town of 30 years earlier. However, the film does not lay blame specifically at Goldie's feet for the town's decay, exacerbated by suburban sprawl and the sustained dying of industrial manufacturing. Certainly, African-Americans have made substantial progress in the intervening three decades, but that progress was severely compromised.

Consider also the scene in which Marty is rescued from the trunk of the black musician's car at the school dance. When Biff's goons are confronted, 3D (Casey Siemaszko) yells: 'Hey, beat it, spook. This don't concern you!' And when Marvin (Harry Waters Jr.) asks—'Who you callin' "spook," peckerwood?'—Skinhead (J.J. Cohen) responds: 'Look, I don't wanna mess with no reefer addicts, okay?' Suddenly, Hill Valley in 1955 doesn't look like such a wonderful place to live, at least not for black busboys and musicians.

Other examples of historical nostalgia abound in *Back to the Future*. For example, when Marty first enters Hill Valley in 1955, the movie theatre is showing the film, *Cattle Queen of Montana* (Dwan, 1954), starring Ronald Reagan and Barbara Stanwyck. But when Marty returns to Hill Valley in 1985, when Reagan was president, the same movie theatre is showing a fictitious X-rated film, *Orgy American Style*. Instead of the utopian image of Hill Valley in 1955, we are greeted in the 1985 version with a police helicopter hovering overhead, its spotlight searching for criminals, a homeless person sleeping on a bus stop bench, and general urban decay. One could argue at length about the sharply ironic relationship between the title of the X-rated film and the greed and excess that marked America during Reagan's presidency in the 1980s.[113]

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[113] See Johnson (1992).

Marty's response to the homeless person and urban decay of Hill Valley in 1985 ironically reveals Reagan's ideology. Whereas we would normally view a homeless person sleeping on a bus stop bench with either pity or disgust (or both), or at least feel somewhat ashamed or uncomfortable to see an X-rated film on the local theatre's marquee, Marty is so glad to be 'home' that he tells the homeless man Red (George Flower): 'Oh, Red. You look great. Everything looks great!' Likewise, Reagan refused to acknowledge homelessness because it revealed a crack in the 'façade of his imaginary America' (Nadel, 1997, p. 162). And when Reagan died in 2004, many commentators focused on his treatment of the homeless issue.[114]

In fact, the number of homeless in America swelled to epidemic proportions during Reagan's presidency, as Reaganomics 'accelerated the gap between the rich and poor' (ibid., p. 163). In Reagan's America, the rich got richer, and the poor got poorer.[115] Marty, like Reagan, refuses to acknowledge this urban blight because it does not reflect *his* image of America. Unfortunately, however, increased homelessness was a clear indicator of the failure of Reaganomics.[116] While it is true that Marty refuses to acknowledge this part of American society and 'development,' perhaps Zemeckis doesn't, and maybe that is why this rather ironic scene with Red appears in the film in the first place (Red is clearly not a main character and could have easily been left out of the film).

On the other hand, the scene's irony suggests a much broader lesson. 'Change,' as we might envision it, is not as it seems. The differences are much less genuine alterations than they are mere adjustments to how the segments, elements, or components of society are deployed and used as well as the candidates who articulate their own versions of the 'change' message. The discourse essentially

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[114] For example, Dreier (2004, online) noted: 'One of Reagan's most enduring legacies is the steep increase in homeless people. By the late 1980s, the number of homeless had swollen to 600,000 on any given night, and 12 million over the course of a year. Defending himself against charges of callousness toward the poor, Reagan gave a classic blaming-the-victim statement. In 1984 on "Good Morning America," he said that people sleeping on the streets "are homeless, you might say, by choice."'

[115] In 1987, for example, the 'most wealthy 20 percent of the population received the highest percentage of income ever recorded (43.7 percent), while the poorest 40 percent received 15.4 percent, the lowest ever recorded' (Hombs, 1990, p. 7).

[116] So adverse was Reagan to the homeless that he pronounced on national television a month before leaving office: 'A large percentage of them were "retarded" people who had voluntarily left institutions that would have cared for them' (Cannon, 1991, 2000, p. 24).

remains the same, and whether it is Reagan, Clinton, or Obama, the American system and its mainstream practices are sustained (i.e. corporate bailouts, continued military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, stubborn resistance to environmental policy changes), with only measurable 'change' being symbolic. It is the utter realisation of politics and civic participation as naked commodification—not only about how politicians are packaged and marketed to citizens, but also 'that elections themselves are conceived along the lines of buying a commodity' (Žižek, 2008, p. 283). Regardless of their party affiliation, many candidates focus more on complimenting their own work and achievements, personal sense of patriotism, and their ideal personality traits than on the reasons why problems of government seem so intractable and difficult to correct.

In permitting Reagan—and not the American populace—to define change, the entrenched fixation on symbolic change has paralysed the collective capacity to seek out and achieve substantial change. Going further, we can see how this void sets the stage for envisioning symbolic change as substantive change to the extent that any action or decision by Reagan—or, for that matter, any of his successors—gives the misleading appearance of genuine change. As with consumer product markets where the value and equity of brand names and labels are viewed as being even more important than the basic traits of product quality, the whole of the political process is symbolism trumping substance where the Reagan brand label has been successfully transmitted by his political successors, regardless of their partisan stripes. Of course, there are just enough brand differentiations to placate the relevant partisan bases of support depending upon the nature and character of the candidate.

It was apparent in the 1980s as it is now that any deviation or divergence from the previous administration justifiably could be labeled as 'change.' In distancing himself from Jimmy Carter, Reagan persuaded voters that what was once wrong was now right, so that all he needed to do was direct the nation back to the pre-1960s days—voiding two decades of unrest, disappointment, shattered dreams, and uncertainties in return for a state of normalcy as popularised in the 1950s. For many, this became the fantastic so that any 'repair' rightfully could be characterised as 'reform,' 'alteration,' or 'change.'

Marty's time travel evokes not only the relationship between fathers and sons, but also the appropriation of time itself. Even the 'happy' ending for both the

McFlys and America is achieved through the heroes' (Marty/Reagan) ability to 'overcome the limitations of time, to rewrite history, to restructure the future' and 'to rescue the father from the burden of time itself' (Jeffords, 1994, p. 88).[117] Although many criticised Reagan for his attempts to reshape the past, he was able to use the past to further his agenda of returning America to a patriarchal domestic unit, as well as an omnipotent 'world' police officer.

In *Back to the Future*, Marty is acutely aware of his fears of destroying the future as he knows it, but he appears in the 1950s with a refreshed confidence and a healthy bit of cockiness. The ending's only real substantive surprise (at least for Marty) is that the future is better than what he ever thought it could be. However, amidst the distance slyly afforded by the fantasy are the occasional flashes of dialogue and commentary that remind us that despite the 'wonders' of time travel, history *does* repeat itself, and that the tragedies and crises of our imagined identities and communities are inevitable. Like Marty, we can learn from them and shape our own future.

3.4 Conclusion

Back to the Future can clearly be viewed as both a postmodern fantasy text as well as a symbolic representation of 1980s Reagan ideology. Reagan, like Marty McFly, reworked history to produce a happier, more prosperous present. The film is much more than a humorous fantasy story about an individual's family history. Marty's success at reuniting and transforming his parents mirrors Reagan's success at reuniting and transforming the nation. George's successful transformation symbolises Reagan's efforts to make America militarily strong again on the world stage, as well as overcome the damage done by losing the Vietnam War. Reagan became the 'father' figure who gave his 'children' just what they needed: a strong,

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[117] Troy (2005a, p. 12) adds: 'Ronald Reagan's America in recovery played to the citizen, the businessman, and the soldier, resulting in "Morning in America"—the greatest party known as the 1980s, when the stock market soared, patriotism surged, the Soviet Union crumbled, and America thrived. As a result, Reagan's administration alienated some fellow Republicans, who occupied the White House from 1969 to 1977. Nixon and Ford administration veterans bristled when President Reagan called the 1970s a "decade of neglect," a time when "those in charge seemed to be operating under the notion that a weaker America is a more secure America."'

materially successful 'family.' And in the end, Marty's efforts to both restore and improve his family—significantly lifting the McFly family to a higher economic class—cinematically fulfills the American Dream.

This is a film that reflects on Reaganomics' reliance on 'drawing on a limitless credit bank of time' (Nadel, 1997, p. 75). In doing so, Reagan was able to create a sense of contentment in the American people—what Galbraith (1992, p. 20) calls, 'the culture of contentment.' And a key feature of this 'content' culture is the attitude it takes toward time—a 'quick fix' is always preferable to any long-term action.[118] More directly, Reagan applied a 'cinematic solution' to fiscal responsibility. Bick (1992, p. 340) contends: 'Perhaps the cinematic paradigm occurs at the close of *Back to the Future I*, where Marty remakes his history to coincide with his fantasy and then is caught in a repetitious cycle allowing only for his own internally derived realizations.'

Thus, in Reagan's America, the *illusion* of national strength and prosperity was much more important than substance or accuracy. Reagan, in his bonhomie and good nature, communicated this sense of the inevitable progress of the world. Unlike his immediate predecessor, President Carter, who happened to be heavy-handed, pedantic, and somewhat preachy,[119] Reagan was admired even by his fiercest detractors for his sense of humour. Much as this particular film, Reagan epitomised the notion of having fun (or being happy) as an American again.[120]

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[118] As Barksdale and Pace (1986, pp. 45-49) assert: 'In its best moments, *Back to the Future* speaks of timelessness—of those things that are never lost because they are always true: most of us at one time or another will fall in love. If most of us will never invent anything as magnificent as a time machine, most of us do at times experience the great satisfaction of "getting something right." In spite of the hydrogen bomb and the mass starvation that are twin swords of Damocles hanging over the world today, the world of the future might turn out to be a fusion-powered utopia as the film suggests—and, in any case, the world can always get better. None of these themes are presented in a heavy, pedantic, or preaching fashion. The film is filled with laughter. Seriousness does not always have to be solemn!'

[119] See Carter's 15 July 1979 televised speech diagnosing a national malaise. Though it is popularly known as the 'malaise' speech, the word does not appear. The correct title is the 'Crisis of Confidence' speech. [online] Available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/carter/filmmore/ps_crisis.html [Accessed 09 August 2008].

[120] A good example is the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, which was an unparalleled one-sided showcase of American athleticism and the superiority of capitalism, thanks to the Soviet Union's boycott of the competition.

As Marty attempts to drive the time machine at 88 miles per hour at the moment the lightning hits the clock tower, we are able to 'escape the limitations of "real" time with an artificial surplus, a false simultaneity that slows down the clock' (Nadel, 1997, p. 76). In contrast to Nadel, Bick (1990, p. 592) states: 'As a tangible force, time is introduced as an overriding concern, an external imperative, and as dispassionately, relentlessly driven.'[121] To illustrate this point, Bick notes all the clocks and gadgets in Doc's laboratory—instruments that not only tell the time, but 'for which time itself is the motivating, driving force' (ibid.). The film's obsession with time matches well with the teenager's crisis because it is at the threshold of becoming an adult when a youngster realises time is not reversible and faces the culmination of the process leading to his/her sexual and social identity.

It would be a grave shortcoming to ignore the overarching political dynamic at play in assessing time's role in the film. The void—now even more acute and apparent than in the 1980s—is that no group has yet mobilised sufficiently to organise for 'change' in a substantive sense. For real change to occur, the individual must transcend the temptation to overindulge in the systemic symptoms that have given so much weight to the illusory impact of 'change' that have been expressed in the symbolic messages, gestures, and media packages. In other words, the cause of these excesses does not lie exclusively in the failures of Reagan, Clinton, Obama, or any other inevitable presidential successor who follows this thematic campaign of symbolic 'change.' It also is the failure of the American system. While it remains important not to excuse nor remove responsibility for seeking justice in confronting leaders who have failed, the individual must also resist losing himself to an imposed reality designed to wash away all recognition of the events and actions in one's historical memory.

The cinematic technique of the camera crosscutting between the clock tower and Marty does indeed mimic a Reagan tax cut in the way it allows one to 'spend'

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[121] Indeed, the perception of time for Bick (1990, p. 592) is 'intimately related to heightened or diminished senses of self (Orgel, 1965; Hartcollis, 1972; Arlow, 1986) and may be conceptualized as linked to specific developmental perceptions—that is, timelessness as synonymous with death and narcissistic reunion with the preoedipal mother or an acute awareness of the restrictive qualities of time as symbolic of the superego and "the father, the unyielding, inexorable, and omnipotent power interposed between incestuous wishes and their realization…whoever is in control of time becomes, like Father Time, the master of life and death" (Arlow, 1986, p. 524).'

more time than what one actually has. All one has to do is believe and 'charge it' on a credit card that never has to be repaid as long as the narrative of the film, like Reagan's version of America, remains convincing and believable.[122] Bick (1992, pp. 37-38) cites Eberwein (1990, p. 7) who believes that the 'self-referential simulacra' in films such as *Back to the Future* reflect a 'resistance to change' that was fostered by Reagan's two-term presidency. Eberwein also claims that the popularity of movie sequels in the 1980s—including the *Back to the Future* trilogy—ideologically reinforce Reagan's 'detached' sense of history, to which 'we are confirmed as detached witnesses' (ibid.).

Furthermore, Bick cites Britton (1986, p. 42) who confirms his belief that 'American films no longer critique American culture, whatever "America" might mean.' In fact, 'the social circumstances which make open ideological criticism the prerequisite of value in the American cinema are the same circumstances which mitigate against it' (Britton, 1986, p. 10). As a result, Britton concludes, it becomes impossible 'to sustain a significant conventional language which addresses itself…to the definition of the real' (ibid., p. 9). Once again, perhaps we should not underestimate the power of Hollywood film and its potential as situated in the Reagan era.

The fact that *Back To The Future* references Libyan terrorists, an international story at the time highly familiar to the movie-going public, is a good example of demonising the 'Other' while simultaneously simplifying and rewriting the narrative arc of complex issues of international politics and foreign policy. While one should be careful not to exaggerate its significance, it does remind us of other forms of mass media channels that privileged those Reaganite discourses which legitimised selective memories of past decades and utterances of 'evil empires.' Indeed, the price for accepting one's subjectification can be extraordinarily high. As Kundera (1996, p. 4) put it: 'The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.' Any attempt at 'change'—that is, substantive, not

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[122] Interestingly, Bick (1992, pp. 37-38) asks: 'Is this so very different from the reconstruction or reconstitution of narrative history in…*Peggy Sue Got Married* [and] *Back to the Future I-III*…films? The fact that there is such a high concentration of these types of films within this past decade highlights just how entrenched this view of history and reality may have been, whatever its determinants…American cinema may not critique its culture, but it certainly (and exhaustively) reaffirms it.'

symbolic change—must therefore begin with a clear acknowledgement of the space occupied by past events and actions.

In the end, *Back to the Future*, like Reagan's presidency, made it clear that while tampering with the past can be dangerous, more danger lies in doing nothing. Marty's survival, as well as America's, *depends* on intervention. And when Marty wakes up to a new morning in 1985 America, he is still at the same address, sleeping in the same bed, and living in the same house. However, everything is new and different: new furniture in the living room, new hip and cool siblings and parents, and expensive cars parked in the driveway. Marty awakens to the newfound affluence of Ronald Reagan's 'Morning in America.' To be sure, in order to maintain the *illusion* of affluence, the past must, at all costs, remain buried in the past. And at the end of the day, both Marty and the film seemingly have succeeded in 'winning one for the Gipper.' Yet, long after the end of the Reagan era, we discover that the dust never really settles on the past, only to be stirred anew in the winds of fresh struggles.

In the next chapter, *Pleasantville* is examined where the sharper edges of the culture wars in the post-Reagan era have their parallels in the film's contradictory visions of suburban life.

Chapter 4:
Case Study #2 of *Pleasantville*

4.1 Introduction

In the film *Pleasantville*, David and Jennifer Wagner play twin teenage brother and sister who are miraculously transported from their 1990s suburban home into the fictitious black-and-white 1950s 'Father Knows Best'-style family sitcom, 'Pleasantville.' However, while they may be twins, David and Jennifer lead dramatically different lives, particularly when it comes to their social status in high school. David is terribly shy and almost invisible, spending most of his free time watching 'Pleasantville' reruns. Jennifer, on the other hand, is overly promiscuous. The impetus for their 'time travel' is an argument they have over a newly acquired TV remote control mysteriously delivered by a television repairman (Don Knotts) after the original was broken. David, an expert on every episode of 'Pleasantville,' wants to watch the 'Pleasantville Marathon,' with the chance to win $1,000 answering trivia questions. Jennifer, however, wants to watch MTV with her date, Mark (Justin Nimmo). In their fight over the remote 'with a little more oomph,' they suddenly find themselves in the Parker's black-and-white living room as Bud and Mary Sue, the obedient son and daughter of George (William H. Macy) and Betty (Joan Allen).[123]

Forced to 'play' their respective roles as Bud and Mary Sue until they can convince the TV repairman to let them return to their real life in 1998, they interact with the characters of 'Pleasantville,' who begin to experience intense emotions—the strongest being sexual desire—and things start changing drastically as the entire town gradually deviates from the standard norms: soda shop owner Mr. Johnson (Jeff Daniels) begins to paint in colour; Betty discovers that she no longer wants to

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[123] Walters (2008, p. 192) points out that 'the choice of shots used to depict Bud and Mary-Sue's battle on screen are replicated in the framing of David and Jennifer's tug-of-war, creating a mirrored association between the living room's reality and the television's fictional world. However, while the struggle on screen is portrayed as light-hearted and playful…David and Jennifer's battle has a great intensity: a move to close-up emphasizing the pair's somewhat brutal expressions…In this way, the film constructs a series of visual resemblances in order to express the difference between a stylized, constructed argument in the television's fictional world and its harsher, more visceral equivalent in the real world.'

be the attentive housewife, and subsequently succumbs to Mr. Johnson's passion for her; the high school basketball team—which has never missed a shot, let alone lost a game—discovers the mysteries of love and sex up at Lover's Lane, and even married couples—who have always slept in separate beds—start purchasing newly available double beds. As the characters experience strong emotions and desires, they suddenly change from black and white to colour, until eventually the entire town explodes in a rainbow of colours. But this transformation is not an easy one. The town fathers, led by Mayor 'Big Bob' (J.T. Walsh), see these changes as a threat to the moral fabric of their town, and they resolve to correct their newly disobedient wives and children by enacting a 'Code of Conduct'—a list of rules that prohibit, among other things, the reading of books (which were once blank but now have printed pages), playing loud music, and using any paint colours other than black, white or gray.

After Mr. Johnson paints a nude portrait of Betty—which he proudly displays in his shop window—and paints a cubist mural with Bud, a riot ensues in which books are burned and anyone of 'colour' is harassed. In his role as Bud, David transforms himself from a 'wimp' to a 'winner' who not only wins the love of Margaret (Marley Shelton), but who also becomes a leader in the 'coloured' resistance against the Code of Conduct. He is brought to trial with Mr. Johnson where he is able to not only empower his father to win back Betty's love, but also invoke so much rage in the mayor that Big Bob turns colour as well. In the end, all of the Pleasantville inhabitants have become emotionally—and for many, sexually— empowered, coloured beings. Bud returns a hero to his real life as David, while Mary Sue/Jennifer chooses to stay so that she can go to college.

This case study will look at *Pleasantville* as a postmodern text by focusing on the significance of suburbia in American life, as well as its use of nostalgia. In this context, it examines the symbolic nature of colour—how it is used ideologically to 'colour' the past as well as our 'memory' of the past, and how the lack of colour in the film makes it a potentially insidious racist text that is devoid of any black characters whatsoever, although black music serves as a powerful influence in the film. And because of the imaginary 'time travel' to the 1950s, it is a fantasy text as

well.[124] However, Cargal (2007, p. 118) claims the words, 'Once Upon a Time,' that appear in the opening of the film 'establishes the genre of that of a fairy tale, signaling the need for the suspension of disbelief necessary for the magic about to happen and the expectation of some moral to the story at its end.' But Cargal takes the phrase out of context because the film satisfies Todorov's (1975, p. 25) definitive requirement of hesitation, as well as Cortázar and Safir's (1976) description of the moment being temporarily disorienting and puzzling, especially when David/Bud wonders whether if, indeed, what he is experiencing could possibly be happening or not.[125]

Comparing *Pleasantville* to *The Wizard of Oz*, some film critics saw the fable or fairy tale aspects of the film as being extremely simplistic, struggling for profound representations of a true psyche and imagination and aiming for a movie-going audience who want to be reassured of their comfortable and nonthreatening suburban roots. Even the analytical appeal to envision the film out of its intended context further highlights its eerily digestible lightness—in short, an unsatisfactory and incomplete view.[126] More precisely, the use of colour in each film underscores the distinction between fantasy and fairy tale. In the late 1930s, when films were almost entirely shot in black and white, the monochromatic landscape was the natural, 'real' world, while colour depicted worlds removed from common realities.

Pleasantville's treatment of colour is complex and deeply symbolic—far more than being part of the mise-en-scène—where monochromatic and colour elements often appear in the same frame. Colour literally becomes another character, a gradually emerging narrator which effectively engages the audience to become increasingly transfixed and engaged with the on-screen transformation. We begin to empathise with the protagonists and are drawn to their viewpoint. The

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[124] As Walters (2008, p. 192) states: 'David and Jennifer's cross over into the television's fictional world defines the film's narrative as a fantasy.'

[125] Walters (2008, p. 193) supports this view as follows: 'We could reasonably take the words [Once Upon a Time] as a declaration of fantasy, and this expectation is certainly rewarded early on in the film's narrative as David and Jennifer are inexplicably drawn into their TV set.'

[126] Willard (2007, p. 141) bluntly asserts: 'This film is a fantasy. The opening frame of the film contains the written line, "Once Upon a Time." No claim to realism for its primary subject or content made. The claim to truth (which it certainly does make) emerges at a higher level of "content." But the events recorded, around which the story line develops, are to a great extent not the kind of events that occur in real life.' But this analysis, too, is incomplete.

cinematography renders a compellingly realistic backdrop where, unlike *The Wizard of Oz*, what has occurred in the 'other' world does not seem entirely a dream.[127] This film, like the others chosen for this study, clearly qualifies as a fantasy based on Todorov's criteria.

Some would say that *Pleasantville* harkens back to a more militant past familiar in the turbulent political, cultural, and social landscapes of the 1960s, before the relatively peaceful truce fashioned artificially by the Reagan years and sustained in the 1990s through the Clinton years. However, we could argue that *Pleasantville* warns how social and community peace are disturbing illusions. At the end of the 1990s and going forward into the post-millennial period, the success of the civil rights movement and the mainstreaming of multiculturalism—leading to unprecedented physical and social mobility as well as cultural and occupational mobility for blacks and others previously disenfranchised—also transformed historical patterns of 'white flight' as well as 'white identity' by pushing it in opposite directions.

The traditional patterns delineating generational preferences in American political ideology remain much as they did, especially during the 1960s. For example, the youngest generation of voters—ages 18 to 34—were the only white democratic groups comfortable enough to cast their votes for Barack Obama in the majority. Meanwhile, older generations of white voters are increasingly willing to listen to messages of intolerance. Since Obama became president in 2009, conservative commentators, television personalities, public officials, or manufactured Internet celebrities say something diminutive, provocative, ignorant, polemic, or unsettling about gay people, Hispanics, blacks, Muslims, undocumented immigrants, and others on a daily basis. Certainly, in previous administrations, there were plenty of instances where groups were targeted with hate or fear-laden messages, but the frequency, pitch, and tenor of these remarks have been amplified in particular by a solid core of high-profile individuals who lay their own claims

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[127] Walters (2008, p. 194) supports this view as follows: 'Pleasantville…is not like Oz' because Pleasantville is 'both an actual and impossible place, it exists independent to the thoughts of either David or Jennifer. Their experiences there are as real as any other experiences.' In other words, 'the film has fused concepts of realness and impossibility whereby the alternative world tangibly exists, but in isolation to the pervading laws of time and space.'

(legitimate or not) to the Reagan legacy. This national Zeitgeist is also amplified by a steadily expanding acknowledgement that as the demographics and popular culture norms continue to shift away from traditionally accepted identities of 'whiteness,' disenchanted generations are moving further away from the polity—physically and ideologically—in their quest to recapture a Reaganesque ideal of small-town America where the conservative rule of law matters.

4.2 Suburban Bliss or Postmodern Nostalgia?

Pleasantville presents us with a sharply contradictory vision of suburban life. The opening images of the fictional 1950s show, 'Pleasantville,' project all that seems good about life in the American Eisenhower-era suburbs: the ideal nuclear family living the ideal life in the ideal house, the friendly milkman making his delivery to the neighbourhood, crisply portrayed in black and white.[128] Suddenly, we are jolted into 1990s America, still in the suburbs, but now all of the houses— although in colour—look boringly the same, as if someone has relentlessly cloned the same beige, stucco home. Here, we find apathetic, disengaged students listening to their teachers drone on about all that is bad with the contemporary world: unemployment, global warming, famine, and AIDS, among other issues. By propelling David and Jennifer from the contemporary suburbs to the seemingly simplistic 1950s, the film's storyline challenges and questions popularly conceived constructs of suburban bliss. For example, the protective icon of the black-and-white police cruiser in the 1990s replaces the milkman from the 1950s. We can no longer take for granted that the suburbs are immune to crime and social unrest.

Suburban life has long been viewed as a socially enviable norm in the United States, and it is where many Americans choose to live in search of 'the good life.'[129]

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[128] According to Coontz (1992, 2000, p. 24): 'In retrospect, the 1950s also seem a time of innocence and consensus: Gang warfare among youths did not lead to drive-by shootings; the crack epidemic had not yet hit; discipline problems in the schools were minor; no "secular humanist" movement opposed the 1954 addition of the words *under God* to the Pledge of Allegiance; and 90 percent of all school levies were approved by voters. Introduction of the polio vaccine in 1954 was the most dramatic of many medical advances that improved the quality of life for children.'

[129] Coontz (1992, 2000, p. 28) cites historian Clifford Clark (1986, p. 209, p. 216) who claimed the '"good life" in the 1950s…made the family "the focus of fun and recreation"…There was an unprecedented "glorification of self-indulgence" in

The suburbs, 'in all their variety and in their shifting visual, cultural, political, and economic forms, are now central to everyday American life' (Dickinson, 2006, online). According to Hayden (2003, p. 3), more Americans live in the suburbs today than in urbanised areas. In fact, they 'are the site of promises, dreams, and fantasies,' serving as 'a landscape of the imagination where Americans situate ambitions for upward mobility and economic security, ideals about freedom and private property, and longings for social harmony and social uplift.' More broadly, the 'semantic engineering,' as Fairclough (1995a) would suggest, is essential to promoting the desirable aspects of suburbia, imbuing statements with positive, ideally preferred meanings, which construct simultaneously how the suburbs can and cannot be perceived. For example, neoconservative Tea Party opponents recently appropriated the language of the free market to argue against allowing more freedom in how land is being used in a rapidly growing northern Virginia suburb.[130]

Therefore, the suburbs represent collective reactions to collective uncertainties and fears in a postmodern world, achieved through statements that denigrate how other geographical divisions, neighbourhoods, and communities are constructed and perceived. The discourse about suburban life involves what Fairclough (1995a, p. 38) calls a 'public colloquial language,' where members of the suburban community are encouraged, through statements by local leaders offered with an inclusive tone, to embrace the need for sharing responsibility in sustaining the order of the community. The inclusive voice, however, is juxtaposed with an authoritative one. Living in the suburbs presents a paradox: the 'dilemma of how to protect ourselves and our children from danger, crime, and unknown others while still perpetuating open, friendly, neighborhoods and comfortable, safe homes' (Low, 2003, p. 11). For some, the suburbs are the enviable option to escape some of the postmodern anxieties in creating a safe home and community. This issue of safety ties directly into postmodern nostalgia because we often long for the past, which is

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family life. Formality was discarded in favor of "livability," "comfort," and "convenience." A contradiction in terms of earlier periods, "the sexually charged, child-centered family took its place at the center of the postwar American dream."'

[130] See Smith (2011, online): '[Y]ou'll be forced to forfeit your land in the suburbs for the development of high-density "urban development areas" also called "smart growth." This is a gross violation of property rights. The inalienable right to own and control the use of private property is perhaps the single most important principle responsible for the growth and prosperity of Virginia.'

typically viewed as a lost—better, more simplistic—time in which to live, even if this cherished and seemingly familiar place never really existed.[131] *Pleasantville* presents us with the 'good' aspects of suburban life while, at the same time, drawing our attention to its contradictory possibilities and impossibilities.

In the 1950s, there was evidence—in the broad popularity of Grace Metalious's 1956 novel, *Peyton Place*—that readers became acutely aware of taboos including sex, incest, rape, abortion, and class tensions, which always lurked uncomfortably close, just below the surface, but were not brought into clear focus with unmistakable 'colour.' In the novel, Constance MacKenzie said: 'If you take to locking your door in Peyton Place, people will begin to think that you have something to hide' (p. 48). The widespread outrage about the scandalous nature of Metalious's novel spread to a censorship campaign in which the book was banned from libraries and communities across the nation.[132] This outrage also reinforced, as previously mentioned, the type of 'public colloquial language' Fairclough referenced. This language propelled the success of suburban family sitcoms such as *Leave it to Beaver*, and was mirrored accordingly in the television show 'Pleasantville.'

Suburbia may be seen as 'bland' and 'conformist,' a place devoid of emotions and passion, but it also offers a sense of security and acceptance. By appealing to individual and collective nostalgic memories, *Pleasantville* attempts to negotiate these contradictions.[133] *Pleasantville* seems to endorse security and safety by offering us 'images of white heterosexuality leavened with just a bit of danger and risk' in the form of 'aberrant sexuality and the authenticity of "other" racial and ethnic identities' (Dickinson, 2006, online). It defines the limits of the suburban

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[131] See Coontz (1992, 2000, p. 29) who points out that '1950s family strategies and values offer no solution to the discontents that underlie contemporary romanticization of the "good old days." The reality of these families was far more painful and complex than the situation-comedy reruns or the expurgated memories of the nostalgic would suggest. Contrary to popular opinion, "Leave it to Beaver" was not a documentary.'

[132] For an in-depth analysis of Grace Metalious and *Peyton Place*, see Toth (1981).

[133] As Cargal (2007, pp. 117-118) rightly claims: 'Our longing for a previous time when things were different, when things were "as they should be," is precisely what the film *Pleasantville* is about. The movie makes it clear that it is pointless to long for such a paradise lost, not only because change is inevitable but, even more importantly, because there never was such a paradise in reality that might subsequently have become lost.'

good life by showing us both what it looks like and what actions need to be taken in order to actually live this good life. By contrasting life in contemporary suburbia with the TV-induced nostalgic memories of the 1950s suburbs, *Pleasantville* asks us to consider which one is better. And while many see the film as being critical of suburban life, it by no means rejects it. Instead, it tries to offer us a 'revised' vision of suburban life, one that offers both safety and homogeneity 'spiced up,' so to speak, with a taste of racial and sexual 'danger.'

Pleasantville's landscape of American pastoral utopianism not only echoes the 1950s, but also of more recent suburban communities,[134] driven by a multitude of desires for larger houses, schools with every imaginable technological and recreational amenity, open spaces, parks, golf courses, nature trails, and, perhaps more implicitly, refuge from larger concentrations of darker-skinned citizens. Just as essential to the post-millennial suburban landscape is the ubiquitous Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV). And, just as today's SUV signifies cultural mobility in the socially and economically privileged suburb, we are easily drawn to basketball team captain Skip's (Paul Walker) pristine 1950s convertible in the film.

An even more important symbol of suburbia are the well-kept lawns, and in the film we see Bud's Pleasantville neighbours happily mowing and watering theirs, an image we see in another suburban film, *The Truman Show*, as Truman works in his front yard in plaid shorts. For Hayden (2003, p. 17, pp. 26-35), one's yard is a measure of one's moral and civic worth. And Girling and Helphand (1994, p. 23) go so far as to suggest: 'Even in the seemingly prosaic suburban yard/garden, Edenic[135] characteristics are present: peacefulness, innocence, and idealized nature, a place where the world is both useful and good to look at.' One's yard even reinforces American gender norms, because it is traditionally the male who does the yard

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[134] These include Coeur d' Alene, Idaho, St. George, Utah, and Georgia's Forsyth County—three of the nation's fastest-growing communities in terms of white population. See Benjamin, R. (2009) who documents the thoughts and experiences of new residents in these communities.

[135] See Cargal (2007) who cites Reinhartz (2003, pp. 164-165) and Aichele (2002, pp. 115-119) who 'stress the deconstructive unveiling of the dystopia beneath the utopian surface of Pleasantville in their reading of the film alongside Scripture—she by focusing on the "new heavens and new earth" of Revelation, and he by returning to Eden.'

work.[136] These yards, while symbolising American gender and class norms, also project images of suburban stability and safety. Thus, even if *Pleasantville* is used to critique American suburban life, the visual appeal of the suburban landscape remains unchallenged.

Pleasantville claims that contemporary suburbia is fraught with danger, which surprisingly, according to Grossberg (1992), leads to both angst and boredom. The individual and collective psyche in suburbia, therefore, is vulnerable to paralysing psychosis and inevitable violence.[137] And Low (2003) argues that the suburbs, formed as a reaction to the anxiety produced by globalisation, both foster and relieve this anxiety—again, an intriguing paradox.[138] But it is within this contradiction that our nostalgic vision of a 'better' past makes sense in the film.

Consider the beginning of the movie, where the images of the 'Pleasantville' television show contrast sharply with David's life in the 1990s. We first see the 'Pleasantville Marathon' advertisements on TV, and, in the very next scene, we are taken into David and Jennifer's high school where teachers monotonously lecture about the grim future. Contrast these dystopic visions with the world portrayed in the 'Pleasantville' TV show, as George comes home from work and is greeted by his loving, cheerful, homemaking wife, Betty, who hands him a freshly made martini.

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[136] See Jenkins (1994, pp. 118-121) who believes that women are generally portrayed as only being concerned with the beauty of their lawn and/or garden, while men maintain overall control.

[137] According to Schaefer (2003, p. 6): 'Things grind to a halt and we do not appear capable of moving on; time stands still as it were and appears to deny the existence of desire. Yet all the while the existence of a sense of impasse implies desire's role in the emotional blockage. In other words, there must be something to block in order for an impediment to exist.'

[138] Consider Aichele (2002, pp. 118-119), who asks: 'Might the so-called "primary world" of everyday life as we know it be itself just another "level of reality," another fictional, ideological construct? ['See Baudrillard (1994), *Simulacra*. This possibly infinite regress appears even more explicitly in other recent movies, such as *The Matrix* (Wachowski, A. & L., 1999), *The 13th Floor* (Rusnak, 1999), and *eXistenZ* (Cronenberg, 1999) (p. 118)']. Or is our supposedly non-fictional world impermeable to fictional beings? The gnosis offered by David and Jennifer to the Pleasantville inhabitants is also offered to the film's audience—and the simulation and fictionality that are inherent in any story, and that are raised to a higher degree by the mechanically reproduced electronic media of film and television, are likewise imputed to the audience's primary world. "The process will…put…models of simulation in place and…given them the feeling of the real, of the banal, of lived experience, to reinvent the real as fiction, precisely because it has disappeared from our life" [See 'Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, p. 124 (p. 119)'].'

All the while, David is trying to ignore the argument his mother (Jane Kaczmarek) is having with his father, her ex-husband, about who is going to watch the kids over the weekend. The contrast is crystal clear: life in the past, i.e. 'Pleasantville,' is safe, loving, and nurturing; life in the present is extremely unstable, egocentric and objectified. It is no wonder that so many Americans bought into Reagan's revisionist image of America's past.

However, the message of the film is not as simple as this dialectic suggests, for even though life in the suburban past of the 1950s seems 'safer,' it is merely an avenue of escape in a television show. It cannot, in any way, be a substitute for 'real' life. Because 'Pleasantville' is only a television show, albeit a powerfully tranquil escape from the ills of modern society, this 'imagined' safety, 'when taken alone, is just as stultifying to the spirit as is the fragmentation and fear of the present' (Dickinson, 2006, online). This same sense was deeply infused in the conscience of those shocked by the 1956 publication of *Peyton Place*, and who subsequently took to banning and burning copies of the novel as well as other compelling indictments of the small town myth.[139]

Interestingly, though, some critics have suggested that *Pleasantville* argues against nostalgia.[140] Yet, we can see how the film argues for nostalgia, especially in acknowledging the represented risks and dangers involved in becoming full, emotionally-realised human beings. Consider, for example, the scene in which Margaret, David/Bud's new girlfriend, realises that life exists outside of Pleasantville.[141] The dialectic between David/Bud's 'a lot more dangerous' and Margaret's 'Sounds fantastic' is key to understanding the movie. While *Pleasantville* does examine and critique the sometimes numbing safety of the suburbs, the 'danger' only 'sounds fantastic' as long as its accompanying fear remains safely objectified and 'contained' in the filmic experience.

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[139] The desperate reaction in some quarters to *Peyton Place* was intended to protect and reinforce the infallible iconography of the quiet suburban town and its values and virtue.

[140] See Muzzio and Halper (2002, pp. 549-550).

[141] When Margaret asks David, '…what's it like…Out there?' David/Bud replies: 'Well, it's, uh, louder. And scarier, I guess. And it's a lot more dangerous,' to which Margaret responds: 'Sounds fantastic.'

4.3 Colouring the Past

Colour makes an unexpected appearance in the black-and-white world of Pleasantville, a town of order, social harmony, regularity, and stability. In short, nothing ever changes here. Ironically, Pleasantville is so squeaky clean the characters don't even need toilets, hence their absence. Equally ironic, the townspeople gorge themselves on copious amounts of food, such as the mammoth breakfast Betty serves David/Bud and Jennifer/Mary Sue after they first arrive in Pleasantville.[142] The somewhat grotesque, artery-clogging excess of this breakfast makes it clear that we are no longer in the 1990s, with its dire predictions of famine. Instead, we have been transported to, as Gabbard (2004, p. 91) so cleverly puts it, the 'simple-minded abundance in the Middle America of the 1950s.' The sights and sounds of this morning breakfast scene—despite its obviously exaggerated portions—is quite comforting to many Americans. In fact, many breakfast foods items, such as scrambled eggs, are considered 'comfort food.'[143]

Furthermore, Lyons and Drew (2006, p. 52) point out that *Pleasantville* both 'recognizes and pokes fun at our collective notions of 1950s life in suburban America; the initial depictions of David and Jennifer's TV mother, Betty—with coiffed hair, high heels, and full makeup, serving her weight in pork products and carbohydrates each morning for breakfast—are both fun and funny.' In addition, 'Jennifer's comment that her 1950s bra, which lifts, pads, and points her breasts in an alarming manner, could "hurt somebody," indicates to us that this film will not merely be a stroll down memory lane: the 1950s have been improved upon, Ross hastens to reassure us' (ibid.).

The lack of toilets and the obsession with fat-laden, sugar-burdened food are effective Puritanical proxies. As in *Pleasantville*, *Peyton Place* reminded its 1950s readers that sexuality, passion, and desire were as commonplace as the meals portrayed in the film. The novel follows Constance MacKenzie as Tomas Makris awakens her long dormant sexuality and she comes to acknowledge how she had unjustifiably spurted out her own anxieties and fears about sex and projected the

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[142] Betty orders them: 'Here's some pancakes, and eggs, sausage, and some good crisp bacon. And of course, a ham steak.'

[143] See Matheson (2008, pp. 809-822).

shame onto her daughter, a young, unmarried, pregnant woman. The novel's portrayals broke away from the puritanical stereotypes of passive domesticity entrenched in the popularised maternal characters of 1950s television series (e.g. June Cleaver, Donna Reed). Mothers, homemakers, daughters, and single women found out they were not alone in their passion, desire, guilt, and shame.

The arrival of David and Jennifer, two jaded and cynical modern teens from the future, brings with it the gradual emergence of colour. And while colour usually has positive connotations, for the people of Pleasantville it disrupts their innocent, bucolic lifestyle, bringing confusion, chaos, promiscuity, and sex. As in the fictional Peyton Place, the residents of Pleasantville gradually realise they are not alone in their discoveries as they see changes in others, and many are uncomfortable with the blatant changes occurring in the world around them. Colour provides the onscreen transformations of self-knowledge in certain individuals. Some characters' awakening threatens to upset that precarious balance of inclusion and authority that sustains Pleasantville, and which has been taken for granted, particularly by the town's elders. Growing increasingly uncomfortable, they acknowledge that they cannot control the transformation, and so, in desperation, they overreach in attempting to eliminate the source of their fears.

As things begin to change, life in Pleasantville is disrupted and orderliness begins to collapse. For example, Jennifer/Mary Sue begins dating the basketball team captain, Skip, and introduces him to sex. Yet so deep is Skip's innocence and purity, he has never even experienced an erection. Unable to keep this newfound discovery to himself, Skip tells his teammates and the urge to copulate begins to spread like wildfire among the Pleasantville teens, who finally learn what 'Lover's Lane' really means.

Jennifer/Mary Sue even teaches her mother about sex, and when Betty realises that her husband George would never condone a sexual relationship with his wife, Jennifer/Mary Sue tells Betty about masturbation. This culminates in one of the most poignant scenes in the film when Betty experiences her first orgasm, an event so powerful it ignites the tree in the front yard, heralding the arrival of more danger—fire—to the town.[144] Prior to this event, the only thing the fire department

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[144] See Walters (2008, p. 198) who points out: 'The symbolic use of fire in the scene naturally equates to notions of passion, but the theme of destructiveness is also

did was rescue cats out of trees, yet another aspect that supports the filmic portrayal of the 1950s as safe, peaceful and stable. Betty's initial reaction to what Jennifer/Mary Sue teaches her is grounded partly in the type of public reaction that encouraged censorship and extreme discrimination found in *Peyton Place*. There was palpable nervousness that intimate secrets would be betrayed by the novel's scandalous writing. A candid dialogue about sex, child abuse, incest, rape, fantasies, and reality was something that people in black and white were evidently not prepared to face. There were plenty of people who were not ready to see the destruction of the hypocrisies they had constructed so extensively that simultaneously judged their community peers and protected themselves.

According to Batchelor (2000, p. 68): 'Pleasantville is not exactly what Bakhtin had in mind when he characterized the hermetically sealed and lifeless classicism of Stalinist art, but it is in its way a parallel McCarthyite universe.' And interestingly, the film reflects Barthes' (1981, p. 77) take on sex and colour.[145] It is colour that revolutionises life in Pleasantville, bringing with it sexual awakening, freedom, and in some respects, more equality for women. The people of Pleasantville, who once knew their place in their sheltered world, have now discovered desire—and the more new things they experience, such as books and rock n' roll music, the more they desire.[146] Betty Parker's release from colourless monotony is quite significant, for she realises there is no need to apologise for self-involved interests. Even a wife and mother deserves the opportunity to put her own interests ahead at times. Putting herself first does not make her a bad wife or mother, but instead an individual who has normal, healthy needs.

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evoked in the burning tree, as if to illustrate that moments of sexual awakening inherently threaten the fabric of this world, constituting a major breach of Pleasantville's routine equilibrium.' Indeed, this scene incorporates 'themes of liberation and release alongside those of threat and volatility.'

[145] Batchelor (2000, p. 68) states: 'Current opinion holds sexuality to be aggressive. Hence the notion of a happy, gentle, sensual, jubilant sexuality is never to be found in any text. Where are we to read it? In painting, or better still, in color.'

[146] See Courrier (2005, p. 239) who suggests that 'Greil Marcus (1999, online) may well have seized upon the most interesting aspect of Pleasantville in a review he wrote for *Esquire*. "The film means to prove that America always contains a secret country, a zombie second self—and that zombie America can be overthrown, in this case with sex and art…It's a fairy tale, but it's not as if it isn't a fairy tale that has already been lived."'

Likewise, the same thing occurs with the local hamburger joint owner/artist Bill Johnson. After discovering colour in an art book given to him by David/Bud, he at first laments: 'I'll never be able to do that…Where am I going to see colors like that?' But Bill does begin to paint in colour, and this discovery also renews his romantic interest in Betty, who finds not only the gumption to leave her husband, but allows Bill to paint her in the nude. And when Bill displays this painting in his shop window, it sparks a riot among the townspeople who not only destroy Bill's shop, but also begin burning the once-blank books whose pages are now filled with stories, pictures, and of course, colour.

As each person experiences new emotions and desires, they suddenly become coloured, and change becomes the norm instead of the exception: the furniture store starts selling double beds, constant sunshine gives way to clouds and rain, and women start to challenge the authority of their husbands. Nowhere can these changes be seen more clearly than in George and Betty's relationship. Whereas before he would announce, 'Honey, I'm home!' and be greeted by a cheerful, martini-toting Betty, George comes home one night—during a rainstorm no less—to find that his wife is not at home and, horror of all horrors, dinner is not ready.

Panic-stricken, George runs to the only refuge he knows—the bowling alley—the de facto male sanctuary of fellowship and community for the leaders of the status quo. George tells the others, who are surprised to see 'real' rain, about his wife's mysterious disappearance and his shock in finding no dinner—not even one of those TV dinners that became an omnipresent artifact of the 1950s.[147] Although the mayor tries to sound reassuring, there is a troubling undercurrent that the mythical foundations of protecting motherhood and maintaining the nuclear family and orderly appearances are coming apart. And to emphasise the brevity of the 'crisis' the Pleasantville men are facing, the mayor asks Roy (Patrick T. O'Brien) to show the others the scorch mark his wife made while ironing his shirt. So alarmed by the changes taking place in Pleasantville, the town fathers and mayor issue the 'Code of Conduct' that is delivered at a town meeting.

Still shocked by his wife's absence and disobedience, George demands that Betty return to her black and white ways. However, Betty does the unthinkable: not only does she disobey, she also leaves her husband, realising that she can no longer

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[147] See Finch (2005, pp. 1107-1109).

exist in black and white. The 'Code of Conduct' announced by the mayor is indeed quite severe,[148] and while it is being announced at the town meeting, David/Bud reads it to the other coloured 'refugees' who are holed up in Bill Johnson's burger shop, which has been destroyed in the riot. This desperate and drastic code is designed to protect Pleasantville, a fully personified character like the fictional community of Peyton Place in Metalious's novel.

The extraordinarily difficult challenge of reconciling incompatible cultural constructs also has been taken up in other films, with *Bend it Like Beckham* (Chadha, 2002) being a prime example. The metaphors of ethnic food, religious traditions, and football constitute the arena for the dynamic clash of cultures the young female protagonist faces (Rings, 2011, pp. 167-186):

> In this dynamic conquest, some temporary mixtures are imaginable but they tend to appear as very limited, fragile and ridiculously funny in their slow adaptation of Western norms and customs (see the two Indian women jogging in traditional dresses in the park), which stresses again the incompatibility of South Asian and Anglo-American cultures.

Likewise, characters would wonder what 'Peyton Place' would 'say' about the actions of its residents, and the book would situate Peyton Place as if it were engaged in the story's dialogue. The same can be said of the town of Pleasantville. Confronted with the individualism and spirit of defiance that threatened to change forever the ideals of Pleasantville and its residents, the town leaders semantically reformed its public colloquial language. This time, however, they discarded a gentler, inclusive tone of shared responsibility in favor of an exclusively

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[148] Mayor: 'One: All public disruption and acts of vandalism are to cease immediately. Two: All citizens of Pleasantville are to treat each other in a courteous and pleasant manner'; David/Bud: 'Three: The area commonly known as "Lover's Lane," as well as the Pleasantville Public Library, shall be closed until further notice. Four: The only permissible recorded music shall be the following: Johnny Mathis, Perry Como, Jack Jones, the marches of John Phillips Sousa, or the Star Spangled Banner. In no event shall any music be tolerated that is not of a temperate or pleasant nature. Five: There shall be no public sale of umbrellas or preparation for inclement weather of any kind. Seven: The only permissible paint colors shall be black, white or gray, despite the recent availability of certain alternatives. Eight: All elementary and high school curriculums shall teach the "non-changist" view of history, emphasising continuity over alteration.'

authoritarian tone, unambiguous about the town's black-and-white character in which all things at all times must be pleasant.

The code galvanised the community standard, not an individual one, and thus, acts of individualism, such as the painting of murals, constituted crimes against the community. For example, in an act of extreme disobedience, David/Bud and Mr. Johnson paint a colourful mural outside of the destroyed hamburger shop that depicts all of the changes and social unrest that has been occurring in Pleasantville. And so desperate is Bill to retain his newfound identity as an artist who has discovered colour, he offers to compromise with the mayor, who believes that life in Pleasantville should remain in black and white. However, David/Bud will have none of this, realising the changes that have occurred in Pleasantville are good for both its citizens as well as his newfound sense of self.[149] These examples of Pleasantville's newly coloured residents standing up for their rights illustrate Fairclough's (1995a) notion of individuals negotiating their social identity in a situation of contestation and confrontation.

There is an interesting struggle occurring between the 1990s' social identities of David and his sister, Jennifer, with those of their 1950s' personifications of Bud and Mary Sue. This is particularly evident in Jennifer/Mary Sue who is transformed from being a promiscuous teenager with little interest in school to someone who actually chooses to remain in Pleasantville so that she can attend college.[150] When David asks Jennifer if she is really sure about choosing to remain in Pleasantville as Mary Sue, she replies: 'I did the slut thing…It got kinda old.' David, on the other hand, is transformed from being a socially inept 'nerd,' whose life used to revolve around watching old episodes of 'Pleasantville' on television, into a young man who

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[149] David/Bud tells the mayor: 'It can't stop at once!...Everyone is turning colors! Kids are making out in the street! No one is getting their dinner! Hell, you could have a flood any minute! Pretty soon, the women could be going off to work while the men stayed home and cooked!'

[150] See Walters (2008, pp. 201-202) for an interesting analysis of Jennifer's transformation: 'The film marks Jennifer's transition in a sequence where she sits reading alone at a desk in her bedroom…The contrast between the surface appearance and meaningful depth in the objects displayed on Mary-Sue's desk indexes the shift in attitude Jennifer makes in terms of her own self-perception. Whereas previously she felt secure of and reveled in the power her appearance held over others, she now discovers resources and qualities that set her on a different course, one which involves a rejection of surface effect and requires others to investigate the facets of her personality to discover her value.'

has not only won the heart of Margaret, but also someone who has become much wiser and more mature—so much so that he is able to give his neurotic, 'real-life' mother, salient advice about her life. When David's mother tells him: 'I had the right house. I had the right car. I had the life…I'm forty years old. It's not supposed to be like this,' David wisely replies: 'There is no "right house." There is no "right car"…It's not supposed to be anything.'[151] The message here is clear: '[T]here is no objective standard of value, all values are arbitrary and subjective, and this is what makes life worth living' (Lakitis, 1998, online). David/Bud, Jennifer/Mary Sue, and Betty—like the characters in Peyton Place—stopped wondering what their communities would say and acted upon what was in their hearts and minds.

Some feminist critics, however, see Jennifer's decision to stay in the make-believe world of Pleasantville and attend college as not just unsatisfactory but blatantly sexist. Newman (2002, p. 143), for example, takes issue with the fact that David has become 'a sensitive boy of the 1990s now worldly-wise about the emotional needs of his single-mom parent. Going back to the future represents progress for him.' However, for Jennifer, her decision to 'stay put' and 'become somewhat of a nerd herself by going to college,' forces her to 'turn away from the body to regain her color in an act of intellection rather than intercourse' (ibid.). Why can't Jennifer's decision to 'stay in the past' be as empowering as David's decision to 'return to the future' (ibid.)?[152] In particular, Newman wants to know what book Jennifer/Mary Sue is reading in her last scene in the film. And what exactly is she going to study 'after she has so paradoxically been introduced to the "pleasures of

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[151] See Reitan (2005, p. 217) who asserts: 'With these words, David is clearly rejecting the idea of cosmic purpose, of some script for how life should be lived. And yet it also seems clear that David is not, in the same breath, denying the possibility of a meaningful life. What David has learned from his sojourn in Pleasantville is that meaning is found in something other than blindly following a scripted role.'

[152] Newman (2002, p. 143) further explains: 'A simplistic gender-bending scenario and swap might have had Mary Sue become "manly" as she sets off on her studies, matching Bud's taking on of the nurturing role with a parallel virilization. The film thwarts this…by involving Mary Sue in a moment of decidedly heterosexual intellectual courtship…All body in the '90s, she can be "embodied" (albeit in a conventional way) and engage in a life of the mind in the past. Going back thus represents going forward for Jennifer/Mary Sue.'

the text"' (ibid.)?[153] Ross, however, leaves these questions unanswered, either inadvertently or deliberately. Perhaps the director deliberately leaves the fantasy open for us to figure out on our own the ways in which our own thinking could be potentially transformed under such circumstances. Therefore, Newman's view seems narrow-minded.

Pleasantville's conclusion, however, appears to short-circuit the film's trajectory, and by doing so, makes *Pleasantville*'s redemption of 'Nerdsville' ironic 'by relying on one of the chronologies that postmodern feminists in particular have associated so intimately with repressive ideologies of Enlightenment humanism by choreographing the relationship between present and past in a disappointingly monodirectional and predictable way' (Newman, 2002, p. 143). We are left to wonder if Ross was aware of the ideological shortcomings of Jennifer/Mary Sue's decision, or did he simply 'forget'? Or, perhaps, this aspect of the film never even crossed his mind. Could it be that Ross, like the men of Pleasantville 'who— laboring under a 1950s American "sit-com" ideology of traditional "family values"—[is] blissfully ignorant of [his] own sexism?' (Hoberman, 1999, pp. 14-16).[154] Ross leaves us potentially confused. If the message is that teenagers who explore their sexuality are headed for problematic situations that could spin out of control–which precisely triggers Pleasantville's dramatic unraveling–then how does it differ from the words of the self-anointed moral and cultural protectors trying to preserve traditional and proper sexual roles?

If we accept Fairclough's (1992a) critical split of the interpersonal metafunction, then, as with the characters in the other films of this study, Jennifer represents a potentially important correction in the imagined arc of chronological development: one's innocence lies within the appropriate domain of childhood, and it should be lost gradually and naturally as one matures. Trying to recapture it, especially through interdiction and mandate, is both wrong and repressive. Thus, Jennifer's return represents an opportunity for enlightened awareness and experience, in which she is able to participate in reshaping, as previously indicated,

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[153] Is Jennifer/Mary Sue reading yet another white, male author, such as D. H. Lawrence, or has she chosen to read de Beauvoir's (1949) *Le deuxième sexe* (*The Second Sex*)—which was translated into English and available in 1953—a book that conceivably would prepare her for the feminist movement of the 1960s?

[154] In Porter (2007, p. 411).

the 'public colloquial dialogue' and bring others to accept that it is time to bury, not resurrect, old-fashioned tropes about American family life.

Pleasantville, like *Back to the Future* and *Peggy Sue Got Married*, offers a satirical take on American nostalgic yearnings for the 1950s and early 1960s—a world that always seems less troubled than the contemporary one. However, Batchelor (2000, p. 69) claims that '[i]f such a world had ever existed, it would have been a kind of purgatory' because '[c]olor is uncertainty, doubt and change, but without it there is only the Law and Home.' Still, as portrayed in the other films, the past *does* seem better than the present. In stirring up the past and trying to tidy it up, however, *Pleasantville* sustains the illusion of suburban stability, but the emerging predominance of colour leads us to contemplate the inevitability of uncontrollable, divergent—even shocking—events that reveal cracks in this imaginary foundation. Just months after the release of the film, residents of Littleton, Colorado—a suburban community that evoked comparisons to the fictional town of Pleasantville—were stunned by one of the largest massacres to ever occur at an American high school, carried out by two students who seemed to epitomise the lifelessness of the black-and-white suburban family.[155]

4.4 Colouring Memory

Pleasantville is a film that exists between the time travel of *Back to the Future* and the media voyeurism of *The Truman Show*.[156] By revisiting the 1950s,

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[155] On 20 April 1999, two students carried out a massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, killing 12 students and a teacher, as well as wounding 23 others, before committing suicide. The shootings at this suburban high school sparked intense debates in the media about the underlying reasons. Among the most frequently cited reports were that high school administrators and teachers had condoned a culture of cliques and elitism that fostered bullying and intimidation. More typical was the shocked reaction that such shootings could occur in Littleton. 'I could see it happening in other places, but not here. Nothing ever happened here' (See Huffington, 1999, online).

[156] Walters (2008, p. 195) makes a point worth noting in comparing *Pleasantville* to *Back to the Future* and *The Truman Show*: '[I]t is crucial that the literalness of those two films set them apart from the dramatic structure of *Pleasantville*: Truman…is *actually* living in a television studio; Marty…*actually* travels to the past. Where David and Jennifer travel to is less distinct both spatially and temporarily, and the film seems to engage with a brand of fantasy that is removed from the storytelling structures of *The Truman Show* and *Back to the Future*.'

the film explores and then breaks down common notions of nostalgic fantasy about domesticity, sexuality, gender, family values, and community service. In the beginning of the film, Jennifer and David are bombarded with a smorgasbord of world blight from which there seems to be no escape. Jennifer reacts by being the high school slut, while David escapes to the past through television reruns of 'Pleasantville.' Here, we find a kinder, gentler world that is ruled by a sense of decency, morality, and family values. David watches 'Pleasantville' reruns so much that he is an expert on its characters and plots, and he can retell the dialogue verbatim. He is, in essence, what Spigel (2001, p. 361) describes as 'the young television-literate generation.' David is part of a growing number of young people who are not so much nostalgic for the past (since they were not even alive in the 1950s and 1960s), but instead a romanticised vision of 'the good old days' mixed with what they believe to be more enlightened, progressive attitudes about the present.[157]

Still, David clearly uses 'Pleasantville' reruns to escape his troubled life. But when he finds himself trapped in the show with his sister, Jennifer, his ambivalent longing for the past is replaced by extreme desire—much like Marty in *Back to the Future*—to get back home. Likewise, for those feeling nostalgically positive about Reagan's illusory rhetoric of limited government and libertarianism, the more extended experience they encounter with his successors, the better Reagan appears in retrospect and the less apparent his actual shortcomings and political contradictions.

Colour is indeed a central character in *Pleasantville*'s narrative strategy. But unlike *The Wizard of Oz*, in which colour appears abruptly, colour appears as a representation of 'realism' that 'gradually invades Pleasantville' (Aichele, 2002, p. 104). In fact, Aichele states: 'Eventually, Pleasantville is entirely colored, so that when David returns to his home at the movie's end, the reality shift involves no media shift at all. The fantasy world has become the real one' (ibid.). Grainge (2003, p. 203) further emphasises the important use of digital colouring techniques 'to

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[157] See Poniewozik (2004, online) who claims that Generation Xers (which would include David's age group) are nostalgic for the 1970s and 1980s, citing 'That '70s Show [Brazil, M., Turner, B. and Turner, T., 1998-2006] and [The] Brady Bunch [Movie] [Thomas, B., 1995], and VH1's I Love the 70s [Altman, Dutton and Hidalgo, 2003] and I Love the 80s [Dutton, Hidalgo, Johnson and Judkins, 2002],' limited-run series in which 'moderately famous actors, comics and musicians riffed on mass-culture icons from Kojack to Kajagoogoo.'

affect a political allegory about the legacy and significance of the 1960s.' Grainge is interested in how nostalgic films such as *Pleasantville*—using digital and computer imaging—affect the way individual and collective cultural memory chooses to remember America's postwar past.

Grainge's observation about colour is significant. It is not simply a tool used to demarcate the past and present in the film; here, the colours are extremely intense and spectacular, creating a shift in the film's registers of reality, fantasy and spectacle. A scrutinised viewing of the film—with the benefit of freezing and advancing frames in slow motion—reveals a deft manipulation of digital colour effects. In some scenes, the colour saturation ebbs and flows in varying percentages where objects in the foreground appear to be more saturated in colour than those in the background. In some frames, a person in colour appears with a person in monochrome, and the person in black and white subtly assumes a bit of colour when close to a person of colour.

This assimilating dynamic works both positively and negatively, as it precisely characterised Reagan's political instincts during the 1980 presidential campaign. While Reagan initially was uncomfortable with the narrowly strident sectarianism of the new religious conservative movement—primarily because of the contacts he had established in Hollywood and as governor of California—he saw the advantage of courting a religious group that only had recently cast aside its partisanship for its newfound political opportunities. Appearing at a nonpartisan group of 15,000 evangelical leaders in 1980, Reagan said: 'I know you can't endorse me. But I want you to know that I endorse you' (Hayward, 2001, p. 680). After his 1980 electoral victory, Reagan had to curry the movement's favor to reinforce his political base.

Pleasantville evokes the past through a stylised attempt to 'textually refigure, the form and locution of memory politics in the semiotic terrain of contemporary culture' (Grainge, 2003, p. 203). As discussed in Chapter 2, Jameson has been extremely critical of such fantasy films and the way in which he believes they distort history and produce a kind of postmodern amnesia. Like Huyssen (1995), Sobchack (1995), and Collins, J. (1995), he is interested in how postmodern representation affects memory practice. While colour represents rejuvenation, monochrome suggests denial. Like the sitcoms it reflects, 'Pleasantville' offered a venue of

escapism and fantasy for those whose lives hardly, if ever, resembled the neat family structures of those sitcoms. By watching these sitcoms, they could ignore their troubled dystopic surroundings, much like the profound lifelessness, for example, in how everyone tragically missed the internalised chaos of the two Columbine killers who were raised in stable, comfortable, two-parent families that populated the once-quiet Littleton suburb. When people don't listen to or see each other, then terribly unsettling things can happen.

Ideologically, *Pleasantville* 'evokes a nascent conservatism against which to pit and champion themes of social justice and cultural and political regeneration' (Grainge, 2003, p. 206). For Grainge, David and Jennifer are able to transform the people of Pleasantville by utilising their 'values and savvy derived from a world of nineties-cum-sixties libertarianism. In each case, a liberal-like Clintonism seems to be organizing the political vision' (ibid.).[158] Grainge, however, does not reach as far back into political history as he should. Clinton's political move toward the center of the spectrum in the middle 1990s had been forced, in part, by a Republican majority in the U.S. Congress that directly owed its political power to embracing the task of fulfilling the promise of Reagan's legacy, primarily with respect to limiting government and controlling its spending excesses.

At first glance, *Pleasantville* seems to be about a return to innocence, and the film evoked strong criticism. For example, Hoberman (1999, p. 16) attacked the film for its 'exasperating mix of technological wonder and ideological idiocy,' while O'Heir (1999, online) accused it of being a 'muddled liberal fairytale about freedom and tolerance in the Frank Capra tradition.' And while many critics liked *Pleasantville* for its cumulative visual effect—after all, the digital techniques employed to gradually colour the black-and-white world are breathtaking—the film also received much criticism for its heavy-handed cultural referencing to artistic Modernism, the sexual revolution, the subversive nature of rock n' roll and jazz music, feminism, and even civil rights, all of which are used to attack and eventually

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[158] See From (2002, online) who claims that 'Clintonism remains the formula for political and economic success in the first decade of the 21ˢᵗ century. In its simplest terms, Clintonism stands for economic growth and opportunity; for fiscal responsibility; for work, not welfare; for preventing crime and punishing criminals; and for non-bureaucratic, empowering government. It promotes cultural tolerance, inclusion, a sense of community, and an ethic of mutual responsibility by asking citizens to give something back to their country.'

defeat right-wing conservatism as represented in the fascist book burnings and the McCarthy-like courtroom battles.[159]

Hoberman, in particular, focused on the ideological aspects of the film and how it reflects the battle between the Clinton-climate of liberalism and tolerance, and right-wing Christian fundamentalism.[160] However, Hoberman and others avoid the inherent rhetorical process that shapes and emboldens political movements. The divide to which Hoberman refers to was incubated in the demagoguery of anecdotes, flippant quips, and seemingly innocuous metaphors Reagan often used in his speeches. While many were alarmed at the occasionally inflammatory nature of his remarks, which alienated, in particular, racial, ethnic, and other social minorities in the nation, Reagan showed how one could get away with it and keep a supportive constituency in line.

Likewise, these complaints seem to echo Jameson's criticism about the indiscriminate use of pastiche in contemporary nostalgia films. *Pleasantville* does, in fact, concentrate less on the past than on deconstructing stereotypes of 'pastness.' However, for Collins, J. (1993, pp. 242-257), *Pleasantville* is less a reflection of Jameson's 'nostalgia mode' than it is 'eclectic irony.' It utilises 'the sophistication of media culture (its icons, images, sounds, scenarios, conventions and genres), creating new forms of textuality by reworking traces of the "semiotic array" in hybrid and ironic combinations' (Grainge, 2003, p. 207). This is accomplished by placing both David and Jennifer, as well as the audience, *inside* the show.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Collins, J. (1993, p. 255) categorises *Back to the Future* and *Pleasantville* as 'new sincerity' films because of the way in which they manipulate contemporary images and texts, which, in turn, affects cultural memory. For Collins, it is not a matter of remembering or even recovering the past, but of 'the reconfiguration of cultural references and textual traces within the semiotic array' (ibid.). He is concerned less with Jameson's contention about the deliberate manipulation of historicity than on how individuals continuously renegotiate their perceptual and cognitive paths to re-engineer their cultural

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[159] See Grainge (2003, p. 207).
[160] See Grainge (2003, p. 207), who claims that '[b]y playing excessively in what [Hoberman] calls a "media hall of mirrors"—a film style dependent on the dizzying mix and self-devouring quotation of historical, mythic and media references—Pleasantville left itself open to criticism of narrative confusion and, more seriously, of demonstrating a lack of political and/or historical depth.'

memories. The problem is that far too many people have become so utterly handicapped by the lack of a fundamental awareness of the relevant history.

Pleasantville creates a 'hyperreal' past defined through the medium of the television sitcom. In doing so, it takes a satirical approach to what seem like old-fashioned family values. However, the lens must focus on the realities being ignored that would upset the pristinely neat portrait of their community. In the aftermath of the Columbine massacre in 1999, investigators searched the homes of the two teen killers, finding gun parts and pipe bombs in a bedroom, shrapnel being made in the family garage, and a diary indicating that the pair had planned the massacre for at least a year. At the school, the principal said he was unaware of the tensions between a group of athletes and a group of 'trench-coat' kids[161] (originally characterised by school officials as 'technology nerds') who were angered when four school athletes saw charges of felony burglary against them reduced to misdemeanors. Teachers dismissed claims that some students were the subjects of racial and ethnic harassment. Amid the intense media scrutiny following the massacre, school officials and Littleton community leaders—like the townspeople of Pleasantville—were stubbornly clinging to the unwritten script that Columbine High School was still the most 'pleasant' of schools in the most 'pleasant' of communities.

Enter David and Jennifer, who are placed 'squarely within a hermetic textual universe rhetorically drawn from the past' (Grainge, 2003, p. 209). Instead of merely revisiting the 1950s, as Marty did in *Back to the Future*, David and Jennifer challenge an *idealised* version of the 1950s, and they proceed throughout the film to 'deconstruct its ideological assumptions' (ibid.). In many ways, then, *Pleasantville* reflects the postmodern historicism that Hutcheon (1988, p. 89) identifies 'when textual traces of the past come into ideological and cultural mediation with the present.' *Pleasantville* seems less concerned with changing the past—which was a matter of survival for Marty—than with creating a reflective *engagement* with the past. Instead of rooting for David and Jennifer to change the people of Pleasantville, as we might do for Marty in *Back to the Future*, we are left pondering if these changes are really for the better. However, the inevitable repression against the 'coloureds' in the film appears unmistakably foolish, forced, and authoritarian to us

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[161] See Greene and Briggs (1999, online).

who, for at least a short while, are seeing through the picture with freshly enlightened eyes.

Like *Back to the Future*, *Pleasantville* examines traditional American family values—a theme evident in the popularity of 'Nick at Nite'[162] reruns of 1950s and 60s sitcoms in the 1990s. Politically, the 1990s marked a time in U.S. history when President Clinton was impeached and nearly convicted for lying about his sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky, a charge he initially denied and later admitted amid a flurry of rhetorical dance.[163] Clearly, Clinton's promiscuity was in stark contrast to the family values portrayed in the sitcoms of the 1950s and 60s. There certainly was longing for the innocence that could be effectively packaged in American films with a prominent nostalgic streak.

Pleasantville, however, is not just about television. Opperman (1998, online) goes so far as to claim that the film is 'a kind of implicit commentary on the Clinton-Lewinsky case.'[164] *Pleasantville*, in essence, is less concerned with changing America's memory of the past, as was the case in *Back to the Future*. There is a difference, however, in the larger-scale emphasis between the two films. The Clinton impeachment crisis was really a manifestation of the culture wars,[165] which sits precisely in *Pleasantville*. The impeachment scandal was a climactic event in a

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[162] 'Nick at Nite' is a Nickelodeon television network that broadcasts classic television shows from the 1950s through the 1980s, such as *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963).

[163] A political sex scandal involving the sexual relationship between then U.S. President Bill Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky, leading to the eventual 1998 impeachment of President Clinton by the U.S. House of Representatives and subsequent acquittal of all perjury and obstruction of justice charges.

[164] Opperman (1998, online) further explains: 'It comes out that the moral values that have brought Clinton to trial do not come from the Bible, as many representatives of America's Moral Right want us to believe. On the contrary, the film makes it clear that these values are associated with American TV. The Moral Right defends a puritan and purified vision of the world, which is raised on the concept of American family series. The film reveals that this vision of America hides a highly repressive outlook on life.'

[165] According to Teixeira (2009, online), the 'term "culture wars" dates back to a 1991 book by academic James Davison Hunter [1991] who argued that cultural issues touching on family and religious values, feminism, gay rights, race, guns, and abortion had redefined American politics. Going forward, bitter conflicts around these issues would be the fulcrum of politics in a polarized nation, he theorized.' See Jensen (1998, online) and Joseph (1999, online) for an in-depth analysis of the culture wars.

political game that began with Reagan's election that had forged a coalition of conservative economists, anti-communist defense hawks, and far-right Christian evangelicals that, for the most part, stayed generally calm in the general public political conversation. However, with Reagan in retirement and Clinton in the White House, the conservative coalition lacked a popular and likeable leader. As in *Pleasantville*, the political dialogue and discourse during the Clinton scandal persistently inflamed the culture wars between a liberal president and a conservative congress.[166]

Pleasantville presents us with a vision of a more liberal, tolerant, enlightened, unified—and particularly telling, coloured—community in stark contrast to the black-and-white conservatism of the 1950s. It attempts to dramatise the social conflicts of the seemingly 'good old days' by exposing its ugly underbelly.[167] The social conflicts addressed in *Pleasantville* involve art, literature, music, morality, sexuality, and difference. Colour in the film represents every advancement from the 1950s to the 1990s—the enlightenment of teens, sexual emancipation, the removal of racial barriers. Colour is also about ideas, about expanding personal horizons, and about avoiding settling into a binding mindset too early in life. In the town of Pleasantville, away from television, there is rebellion in

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[166] Newt Gingrich, the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and the nation's highest ranking conservative Republican, had none of Reagan's personal charm but, as Pleasantville's mayor did with the town council, he effectively energised the base of the Reagan-built coalition to challenge potential widespread societal change. On matters of abortion, civil rights, health insurance reform, immigration, tax reform, domestic security, industry regulation, sex education, free trade and market economic policies, gay rights, equal employment opportunities, the Gingrich-led coalition demonised Clinton at every turn with the help of talk radio personalities such as Rush Limbaugh, the conservative Fox News Network, and conservative polemicists and pundits.

[167] See Willard (2007, pp. 152-153), who claims that 'not very long ago people still generally assumed that traditional moral rules and order were a good thing: that the Pleasantville type of life—where people did not routinely do what they felt like doing but did what they were supposed to do—was the moral ideal. That the shift of moral mood has been relatively recent is indicated by the fact that some fifty years ago the Pleasantville type of sitcoms were taken to be realistic portrayals of life in suburbia, which itself was thought to be a good place to be and life there a good way to live. Exposing the presumably dirty underside of such an "ideal" suburban existence as a major and constantly reiterated theme is only quite recent in filmmaking. It almost seems that we today are compelled to defend ourselves against a past we can no longer sustain and to which we are now morally superior.'

books, as the library is transformed from its quaint placement as scenery to a laboratory where ideas are experimentally formed and transformed.

Colour in *Pleasantville* also is subversive, representing a cinematic swipe at virtually every form of oppression taken in the name of values from art to community integration. This is particularly evident during the riot in which the conservative townspeople go on a rampage, breaking storefront windows, burning censored books, and sneering at the new 'coloured' folk of Pleasantville. Consider the scene in which two still black-and-white high school boys harass the now 'coloured' Betty: 'Why don't you show us what's under that nice blue dress?' In the black-and-white world of Pleasantville, such sexual harassment would have been unheard of—in fact, impossible. But as the townspeople become coloured, one-by-one they become the 'other' who is to be feared and detested.

Through the use of digital colourisation, *Pleasantville* is a film that cleverly rearticulates the past and the present, creating an ironic 'suburban pastoral.'[168] It recasts conservative nostalgia for small-town family values, attempting to 'recuperate the significance and memory of the 1960s' (Grainge, 2003, p. 216). Or, as Gitlin (1993, p. xiv) puts it: 'the genies that the Sixties loosed are still abroad in the land, inspiring and unsettling and offending, making trouble.' Indeed, Jennifer and David embody these sexually savvy, politically sophisticated 'genies' who have 'demystified notions of identity, gender and family,' which enables them to 'question, interrogate and problematize the forms and values of the media past caricatured in Pleasantville' (Grainge, 2003, p. 217).[169]

However, as Aichele (2002, pp. 104-106) points out, 'what the 1990s audience finds funny is not necessarily what the 1950s audience found funny. Characters and situations seem unrealistic to present-day viewers in ways that they did not to the original viewers of actual shows in the 1950s.' While we may view the way people behaved, spoke, dressed, wore their hair, etc. in the 1950s as 'old fashioned,' or even 'strange' or 'ugly,' we tend to view the automobiles and music of the era as being 'classic' (ibid.). But there is a darker side to the use of colour in

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[168] See Adair (1999, online).

[169] Grainge (2003, p. 217) further explains: 'Using the infusion of color to dramatize this process, Pleasantville is a pregnant, even indicative, memory text of the late 1990s: it articulates a discourse of cultural remembrance in a moment where the textuality of memory has, itself, become increasingly hyperconscious.'

Pleasantville that is not so readily apparent, one that reflects Fairclough's (1992b, pp. 193-217) third dimension in CDA—'discourse-as-social-practice'—and that is Hollywood racism.

4.5 Is *Pleasantville* a Racist Text?

Danger and risk in Hollywood films are often codified in issues of race and sex, and 'racial' difference—'whites' versus 'coloureds'—is a key element of *Pleasantville*. However, the film projects this difference within the 'safety' of white suburbia. Experiencing sexual passion is one of the keys to becoming 'coloured' in the film, but the true cause is experiencing any kind of strong emotion, including anger, as evidenced by the transformation of the mayor during the trial near the end of the film. But is *Pleasantville* a racist text?

As the residents of Pleasantville become 'coloured,' the town becomes increasingly racialised as the conservative black and whites try to control and even oppress the coloureds. For example, they post signs that read, 'No Coloreds,' and impose rules for banning any kind of 'coloured' behaviour, including listening to rock n' roll music. In this respect, the film echoes the emerging civil rights movement in the 1950s and the struggle for racial equality that would climax near the end of the 1960s. Ironically, however, the town of Pleasantville is completely void of any black citizens, as well as any other 'non-white' race.

Despite this absence of African Americans, however, becoming coloured in the film is also marked by a shift from listening to 'white' to 'black' music. For example, when Jennifer/Mary Sue seduces Skip at Lover's Lane, we hear Pat Boone singing 'Mr. Blue' (Blackwell, 1959). But as the sexual passion spreads like wildfire among the Pleasantville teens, the music becomes Gene Vincent and Bill Davis's (1956) rhythm and blues tune, 'Be-Bop-a-Lula.' And when a Pleasantville teen drops a coin into the jukebox at Mr. Johnson's soda shop, we hear, 'Lawdy Miss Clawdy' (Price, 1952), a song written and performed by black men with the 'racy' lyrics: 'You like to ball in the morning, don't come back until the night.' Even more telling is the scene in which David/Bud arrives at the soda shop where he is confronted by teens eager to find out what is outside of Pleasantville, to which he

replies: 'There are some places that the road doesn't go in a circle…the road keeps going….'

When the Columbine massacre occurred barely six months after the release of *Pleasantville*, there was a painful familiarity that echoed in the public discourse: the 'narrativization' as outlined by Fairclough (1995a). The events of Littleton followed similar school shootings in other small, quiet towns perpetrated as well by white, suburban teen males.[170] Amid the comments that 'things like this don't happen here,' were the not-so-subtle implications of class-based and racial stereotypes about how danger appears. However, few were willing to confront the irony of their comments—If 'things like this don't happen here,' where do they happen?—and the need to explore why deviance and violence had been persistently racialised.

There were, however, other means by which Pleasantville residents could safely explore entertainment that contrasted with their boring routine experiences in the town. For example, during David/Bud's explanation, David Brubeck playing 'Take Five' (Desmond, 1959) is heard in the background. This song is significant for as Gabbard (2004) points out, Brubeck's music was instrumental in introducing bebop music to 1950s white audiences. And as David/Bud tells the story of Huck and Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1884), we hear Miles Davis playing 'So What' (Davis, 1959).[171] Indeed, this shift from 'white' to 'coloured' music reflects the newfound identities of the Pleasantville coloured residents as they become what could possibly be categorised as 'urbanised.'

It is interesting to note that while David/Bud is explaining the story of *Huckleberry Finn*, he completely avoids its racial/discriminatory overtones, such as the use of the word 'nigger'—offensive to most American blacks in the past as well

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[170] On 19 May 1998, three days before his graduation from a high school in Fayetteville, Tennessee, an honor student shot and killed a classmate who was dating his ex-girlfriend; On 01 December 1997, three students were killed and five wounded at a high school in West Paducah, Kentucky by a 14-year-old boy; On 24 March 1998, two boys, ages 11 and 13, fired on their Jonesboro, Arkansas middle school from nearby woods, killing four girls and a teacher and wounding 10 others; On 01 October 1997, a 16-year-old boy in Pearl, Mississippi fatally shot and wounded seven others after stabbing his mother to death.
[171] For Gabbard (2004, p. 98), this song is a 'signifier of profound transformation…As black music, the Miles Davis recording carries with it an aura of the forbidden and the transgressive that Pleasantville needs as it moves the narratives of the civil rights movement to the small town devoid of African American faces.'

as the present—or how Huck's willingness to help Jim escape slavery in the South to freedom in the North reflects his rejection of white racism while embracing the true friendship and humanity he has found in Jim. Instead, David/Bud emphasises that freedom comes from within—it is a personal decision—completely avoiding the history of slavery or the deep-rooted racism that started boiling in 1950s America. More importantly, all of the characters in the film that are discovering their newfound sense of freedom are depicted as 'coloureds,' even though they are *all* white. It's as if the film is trying to say: 'Look, even white people can suffer from racial discrimination.'

Consider also the crucial courtroom scene, which clearly resembles *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960), in which David/Bud declares: 'It's in you and you can't stop something that's inside you.' What he really means is that everyone is 'coloured' inside, which, in turn, makes everyone all the same on the outside. But try telling that to an inner-city Black American teen who is struggling to survive in the 1950s, with no white Huck to take him 'down the river' to racial equality and freedom.

In the late 1990s, there was a deeply embedded aspect of racism that tinted the commentary and analysis of the Columbine tragedy. While many drew parallels on the surface between Littleton, Colorado and the mythical Pleasantville, few wondered about the steady stream of experts being called upon by the media to offer a wide range of intellectualised explanations for the white suburban killers. The most obvious characteristic of the killers—their 'whiteness'—was completely overlooked. On the other hand, in reports covering random acts of violence perpetuated by blacks, one's 'blackness' was rarely, if ever, overlooked—whether it was the question of black households headed by single black mothers, or the ghetto underclass. Rare is the acknowledgement that 'things like this don't happen here' in the black family's neighbourhood.

Just as important as the shift in music is the role that art plays in Pleasantville in symbolising the growing emotional awakening among the townspeople. When David/Bud opens the art book that he's brought to show Mr. Johnson, the first painting we see is Masaccio's 'The Expulsion of Adam and Eve.' The parallel between Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden and David and Jennifer is obvious: 'David and Jennifer entered the paradise of Pleasantville and

have broken its rules causing guilt and conflict' (Winegarden and Charron, 1999, online). And Deacy (2003, pp. 203-204), for example, explains the Biblical aspects of *Pleasantville*, claiming that the film 'may be read as a cinematic analogy of the Fall.'[172]

Furthermore, Aichele (2002, p. 117) makes an interesting comparison between David and Adam, claiming that they are both 'ordinary human being[s], and like the serpent…David…brings forbidden knowledge—supernatural knowledge—to Pleasantville.' Margaret can also be seen as playing the role of Eve in offering David/Bud the apple. However, this is 'only after (and because) David as the serpent has already tempted her' (ibid.), a stunningly clear example of Todorov's explanation of the uncertainty between the marvelous and the uncanny.[173]

Additionally, Mr. Johnson's nude portrait of Betty represents a physical manifestation of the social disruption occurring in Pleasantville, which also causes the first major reaction by the 'white majority.' Finally, the provocative mural painted on the side of Mr. Johnson's soda shop makes a social statement, much like the graffiti found in inner cities. It serves as a bold rejection of the 'Code of Conduct' and the 'old' social order. In this sense, it is symbolic of the black uprisings of the late 1950s and the entire 1960s.

However, it is also symbolic of the ignored dangers—those serpents in paradise—that led to the Columbine shootings and similar tragedies in other small towns across America. If a town and its people are invested wholly in sustaining at all expense the sanitised illusion of an imaginary world where only 'pleasant' things happen, how does one then find the time and energy to become the school principal

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[172] Deacy (2003, pp. 203-204) elaborates as follows: 'Indeed, according to Thomas Hegel, although in the Genesis story, humankind lost its state of innocence and bliss by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the Fall narrative nevertheless has a message and a prediction of reconciliation and redemption. It is of a kind, moreover, that the characters in *Pleasantville* may be seen to emulate. Hegel considered paradise to be no more than a "dreaming innocence," which is lacking in the knowledge of good and evil, lacking in self-consciousness and lacking in an ability to choose.'

[173] According to Aichele (2002, p. 117): 'This accounts for the encounter between David and the TV repairman…in which David refuses to allow the restoration of paradise. God splits in two and tears Eden apart, but it also opens a space for a nonutopian, uncertain, human world. The old sitcoms go their way, and a new, more colorful day arrives. By the movie's end, a sadder-but-wiser deity drives off in his repair van.'

who cares just as much about kids who wear trench coats as those who shine as athletes, the teacher who mentors the alienated child in the classroom, or the parents who demonstrate how much they love their children?

4.6 Conclusion

While *Pleasantville* was made a decade after Reagan left office, it portrays the extraordinarily realistic tensions between the magical presence of colour's capacity to transform the circumstances most relevant to us, and nostalgia's presumption that the social and moral orders of earlier generations were ideally functional and beneficial for the community. The film asks us, for better or worse, to consider the longer-term impact of the magical type of wishful thinking and fundamental nostalgic yearnings to which Reagan identified strongly, and which were epitomised in the iconic tropes of the Reagan-era *Back to the Future* and *Peggy Sue Got Married* films. While *Back to the Future* and *Peggy Sue Got Married* were released during the height of Reagan's popularity and national approval ratings, *Pleasantville* came out at a time of intense political scandal pitting a popular, liberal president (Clinton) against a conservative opposition mitigating its own existential anxieties through lens heavily tinged with nostalgia for its most popular partisan icon (Reagan). It illustrates quite effectively the high risks involved when a group selectively edits the empirically-based legacy of its most beloved figure.

 Pleasantville asks us to consider the boundaries between the urban and the suburban, black and white, and good and evil, all within the safety, comfort, and normalcy of white, heterosexual suburbia. Moreover, it questions and examines the 'dangers' of succumbing to one's true feelings and emotions while contrasting the 1950s nostalgic past with contemporary life. By 'crossing over into this dangerous territory,' the film seeks to 'create the human subject in the suburb through the imagining of the sublimity (and thus the unsayability) of…cross-racial, cross-generational…sex' (Dickinson, 2006, online), just as the *Peyton Place* novel did in the 1950s.

 While many critics tend to see the film more pessimistically because Pleasantville's Reagan-friendly social order at the end of the film essentially remains in place, I prefer to view the film with a broader historical frame vis-à-vis the other

films being studied, which were produced during the height of the Reagan era. *Pleasantville* helps explain why many communities are so closely knit that they could never fade away suddenly, even as hybrid elements are incorporated into suburban communities.[174] For those who approach the option of leaving their parents' legacy and culture behind, the decision of embracing their departure is taken more self-consciously and opens paths toward innovative self-expression. Hardly a nightmarish transition, it has the potential of being a life-enriching tradeoff. By 'accepting' the narrative of *Pleasantville*, we can safely 'risk' experiencing 'authentic' emotions.

The film sustains the Reagan narrative, allowing us to temporarily 'escape' the doldrums of suburban life, but dutifully returns us to the same suburbs and the same relationships, just as at the end of the film David—surprising to some critics[175]—decides to return to his home in the 1990s suburbs. However, he is now able to cope much better with this more 'dangerous' world because of the lessons he has learned in 1950s Pleasantville. The past has become instructive—there seems to be much we can learn by looking back. But in the end, many Americans tend to, like David, return to the safety of their home and family—and more often than not, this home is in the predominately white suburbs.

However, the film's most significant challenge to the Reagan formulation of stable, contented communities becomes acutely evident in the uncanny timing of tragedies such as the Columbine shootings, which occurred shortly after the film's release, as well as post-9/11 events such as anti-Muslim protests. Likewise, echoes of Pleasantville's Code of Conduct could be seen in communities adopting laws calling for aggressive police enforcement, zero-tolerance approaches, broad and vague quality-of-life laws, and the criminalisation of immigrants. All of these events bring *Pleasantville*'s highly idealised fictional account into a deeply depressing focus revealing that beneath the façade of imagined normalcy, the pretense of denial and detachment feeds an evil, which eventually unleashes chaos with tragic consequences.

Pleasantville also offers subtle warnings to those who believe they erroneously can hijack and mutate the Reagan legacy, thinking they can sustain a

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[174] For example, the Reform synagogue, the Greek Orthodox church, and the Islamic mosque.
[175] See Simon (1998, online).

discourse of healthy civic enlightenment and engagement. In Pleasantville, when faced with the prospects of living in a world some residents could not begin to comprehend, the town fathers resorted to some of the most desperate primitive responses to exorcise the fear from their community. All too often in the news, we have witnessed the ritual of books, artwork, records, and holy scriptures char and disintegrate into smoke and ashes while listening to respectable leaders speak intolerance and ignorance in prominent spaces.[176] All of this sounds oddly familiar in Pleasantville. We are burning much more than symbolic artifacts of cultural and social expression.

The next chapter examines *Peggy Sue Got Married*, which also recreates a deeply nostalgic feeling for a so-called simpler time of American life, far more in line with *Back to the Future* than with *Pleasantville*. While it reflects a time when young women often chose to be married because there were relatively few other pragmatic options, the film also opens windows of opportunities for negotiating the capitalistic ideology embraced so enthusiastically during the Reagan years.

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[176] A recent example being Terry Jones, a controversial pastor who threatened to burn copies of the Quran on 11 September 2010, but later cancelled the plan amid angry demonstrations by Muslims around the world. While many Americans and Muslim leaders around the world were shocked by the announcement, there was an unsettling sense of inevitability about his plans to burn the Quran.

5.1 Introduction

At first glance, Francis Ford Coppola's 1986 film *Peggy Sue Got Married* seems to resemble *Back to the Future* as another nostalgic time travel movie because of its 'use of an imagined past to escape from a bitter present' (Crowdus, 1994, p. 91). In fact, Carter (2000, pp. 257-266) claims that both films are symptomatic of the American 'cultural impulse to internalize the power of time' as well as America's 'deeply-rooted chronophobia.' Both films 'reverse the arrow of time,' reflecting the 'American passion for the new' as a 'symptom of a deeper collective urge: the desire to escape time altogether' (ibid.). However, the main difference lies in the fact that Marty McFly was transported into the past via a time machine in the 1985 incarnation of himself, whereas Peggy Sue awakens in the past—this time, it is 1960—in the 17-year-old incarnation of herself, but with her 42-year-old mind still intact. Furthermore, Marty's knowledge of the 1950s is based on recycled pop culture. He is essentially 'lost' in a world where he does not know what is going to happen next. Unlike Marty, Peggy Sue actually knows her future: an adult life filled with compromise and disillusionment that ultimately will end in her separation and divorce from her husband Charlie.

While the passage of time seems so readily familiar, the concept of time, as demonstrated in this film, as well as the others in this study, is elusively derisory. Young (2008, online) claims, for example, that 'it is not at all clear that *Peggy Sue Got Married* is a time travel movie…It isn't about traveling in time.' Young questions what 'damage' Peggy Sue's trip to the 'past' has done—if indeed she did 'travel' to the past—and suggests that 'she's probably done very little…and the loop will be self-sustaining.' Young posits that if the film contains any 'time travel at all, it's probably an N-Jump'[177] because Peggy Sue 'did not choose to travel back in

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[177] Young (2008, online) defines an 'N-Jump' as follows: 'In an N-Jump, time extending from the past reaches point A, the point in time to which a traveler from the future will return, and beyond to point B, the point from which the traveler leaves for the past. During this segment of the time line, no changes have been made; it is the original unaltered sequence of events. When our traveler leaves point B, that time line ends—the history based on the A-B segment cannot progress,

time,' rather 'it happened to her…abruptly' (ibid.). In addition, Young points out that whatever actions Peggy Sue might take to change her destiny, they will have a limited impact on her marriage: '…we have every reason to expect that she will arrive alone at the reunion despite her changes, and again be queen' (ibid.). Besides, Peggy Sue does nothing to prevent her trip back to her present life.

While Young's concept of time acknowledges how the sense of time might be accepted in terms of a reified world, I think it still must be viewed further in terms of how its various constructed (as Fairclough would indicate) cultural, historical, biological, and personalised dimensions converge and interact. As Dika (2003, p. 144) contends, *Back to the Future* and *Peggy Sue Got Married* are similar in the way they 'find a past that is flawed and that ultimately yields no security.' Both films offer a nostalgic look at a seemingly 'simpler' era in American culture, and both Marty and Peggy Sue represent post-modern protagonists who are 'decentered' by their time-travel predicaments. We must remember that time is not synonymous with change, order, or sequence. For Marty and Peggy Sue, their trials of personal redemption necessitate being redeemed from time.

Like *Back to the Future*, *Peggy Sue Got Married* creates an 'intensely nostalgic atmosphere that pervades the film' (Babington, 1998, p. 94). For example, the soundtrack features a collection of popular 1950s rock n' roll songs: 'Peggy Sue Got Married' (Holly, 1959), 'Tequila' (Flores, 1958), 'A Teenager in Love' (Pomus and Shuman, 1959), 'I Wonder Why' (Anderson and Weeks, 1958), and 'Shimmy Shimmy Ko Ko Bop' (Anthony, 1959). Peggy Sue's lamé is turned into a fifties-appropriate gray in the flashback and many of the people in the school are wearing pastel yellows and grays. On the other hand, the mysterious beatnik loner stands out in his black clothing in an otherwise all-pastel setting. However, as Bawer (1992, p. 37) rightly points out, the film is much more than a 'sentimental journey into the past' because 'the idea of time travel…being able to go back and do it right this time around…is itself absurd.' As a postmodern text, the film also mixes genres: at times it is a romantic comedy, while at others it is a romantic melodrama. But at its heart, the film's primary focus is on sexual relations. And ideologically, it seems to choose

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because the instant the traveler reaches point A, it is changed by his presence, and is re-named point C; this creates an alternate C-D timeline, with D being the same point in time as B. At point D, the traveler can and does return to point C with the same intentions, history is able to continue into the future.'

'monogamy over multiplicity and diffusion in the sexual sphere' (ibid.). For example, despite Peggy Sue's one-night sexual fling with the bohemian Michael Fitzsimmons (Kevin J. O'Connor), she chooses Charlie, the only man she has ever dated.

Peggy Sue's time travel ends by her having sex with Charlie on her eighteenth birthday, through which their daughter Beth (Helen Hunt) is conceived. But unlike the first time Peggy Sue slept with Charlie, she does so the second time *intentionally*, resulting in Beth's conception no longer being an accidental teenage pregnancy. Instead, Peggy Sue is looking for stability in her relationship with Charlie, and therefore she chooses family. The 'mistakes' that Peggy Sue made with Charlie have, after all, 'given Peggy Sue her children, and she won't change that' (Dika, 2003, p. 143). Some critics have read the narrative as being simply nostalgic and, therefore, conservative. However, the film's coherence as a text, as Fairclough (1992a) would suggest, stems also from acknowledging the potential ways, albeit more muted than in other stories, of seeing how the film undermines the Reagan cultural fantasy that there is a stable, idyllic past to which the United States can easily or simply return.

Peggy Sue Got Married reflects American women who came of age in the 1950s—women who often chose to marry at a young age because there were few, if any, other options available. It was the social norm for these baby-boomers to marry young and bear children.[178] Peggy Sue's time travel back to 1960 occurs before the feminist movement emerges in the public discourse, as well as the sexual revolution that would explode later in the decade and be sustained well into the 1970s. And even though Peggy Sue is given the opportunity to imagine a different kind of life, in the end she is resigned to her fate and reasserts her identity as a wife and mother. The message seems to be that it is okay for Peggy Sue to give up her dreams to be a dancer and Charlie's dream to be a singer because in doing so, it reunites the family and awards them with 'middle-class success: money, stability, security' (Young, 2008, online). In particular, marriage is imagined as a woman's most important accomplishment. Being single or even pursuing an independent career choice is

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[178] The U.S. birthrate peaked during the 1950s. In 1957, for example, it was 25.3 per 1,000. [online] Available at: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/statab/t941x01.pdf [Accessed 14 October 2011].

viewed as an intermediary or transitory one, not as a predicate for complete life empowerment.

The film also reflects the Reagan ideological rhetoric in a similar, yet different, way as *Back to the Future*. Whereas *Back to the Future* was about legitimising the strength of the father's role and re-envisioning history, *Peggy Sue Got Married* attempts, at least on the surface, to reinvigorate the case for family and marital values at a time when 1980s America was experiencing a decline in such values and institutions.[179] President Reagan based his presidency not only on economic reform and military might, but also on reestablishing 'traditional' family values—traditional in the sense that men should regain their position as the head of the household and breadwinner, while women should refocus more of their energy and attention to child-rearing.

In fact, so important were family values to Reagan—ironically, the first divorced man to become a U.S. president[180]—that it was the central topic of his 20 December 1986 radio address to the nation.[181] And by looking back to family values of the 1950s, one finds that for women, at least, whatever was valued most was not 'individual self-improvement and independence of thought, but obedience' (Stone, L., 1994, online). In fact, up until the early 1960s, 'the old family values still held…They included religious piety, obedience to parents and superiors, hard work, optimism about future upward mobility, and the deferment of gratification in coping

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[179] As early as 1976, the Republican Party political platform lamented upon the erosion of the family and family values due to the rising U.S. divorce rate (See Stone, L., 1994, online). And Donovan (1999, online), for example, cited research indicating that the 'divorce rate in the 1980s was twice what it was in the 1950s, and [it] has declined only moderately since then.'

[180] Ronald Reagan married Hollywood actress Jane Wyman in 1940, and the couple divorced in 1948.

[181] Here is the full text of Reagan's speech: 'We know how good it feels to be with your families—how it warms and comforts us, how it gives us strength and joy. But I wonder whether we always give our families the appreciation they deserve…all those aspects of civilized life that we most deeply cherish—freedom, the rule of law, economic prosperity and opportunity—that all these depend upon the strength and integrity of the family. If you think about it…All of our lives, it's the love of our families that sustains us when times are hard…the family today remains the fundamental unit of American life. But statistics show that it has lost ground, and I don't believe there's much doubt that the American family could be, and should be, much stronger' (Reagan, 1986b, online).

with sexual passion' (ibid.). These elements find a prominent home in *Peggy Sue Got Married*, even as they are challenged by the 42-year-old protagonist.

The repetition of the sexual act with Charlie steers *Peggy Sue Got Married* away from the romantic comedy genre in how it emphasises family and children, a topic 'notably absent in the genre, even in the "comedy of remarriage"' (ibid.).[182] We can view the film as a contemporary reexamination of this remarriage genre, especially as it is tinged occasionally with darker bits of melodrama. Coppola seems to be turning the classic romantic comedy genre on its head in order to make a sharp social commentary on Reaganism. *Peggy Sue Got Married* harkens back to the time when these remarriage comedies would have been comfortably familiar and popular during the transformation of the postwar American landscape into a suburban-dominated land, where values of consumerism and marital conservatism would have been championed.[183]

Peggy Sue only has two options: either she reconciles with Charlie and restores her marriage and family, or she starts life anew without him.[184] In many respects, she is like George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*[185]: '…she receives the gift of second sight.[186] But Peggy Sue's flashback convinces her that she must treasure what she has lost, not what she has achieved. A bittersweet dream, but it is knowledge to build on' (ibid.).[187] And although Peggy Sue is a 'Capraesque heroine,'

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[182] See Cavell (1981), Britton (1983), and Babington and Evans (1989).

[183] See Brouwers and Paulus (2006, pp. 21-34) for an in-depth analysis of Hollywood's comedies of remarriage genre.

[184] For Corliss (1986a, online), Peggy Sue 'is an alien in 1960; she will be stranded, too, when she returns to the '80s, where the boulevard of possibilities has narrowed to a blind alley.'

[185] See Scheib (1996, online) who points out that 'It's little wonder that *It's a Wonderful Life* became the film of the '80s: Frank Capra's time-travel parable toyed with the irreversible causality of parallel universes solely in order to indulge in an orgy of thankfulness for things never changing—thereby providing the inspirational blueprint for everything from *Back to the Future* to *Peggy Sue Got Married*.'

[186] Levy (1991, pp. 240-241) also claims that the film is 'based on a universal fantasy, posing an existential question: Given the opportunity to relive one's life, what changes would one introduce?' Thus, Peggy's journey to the past addresses 'the periodic need of individuals to reassess their lives and reestablish their self-worth.'

[187] We should consider Bawer's (1992, p. 38) point that while *Peggy Sue Got Married* 'echoes *It's a Wonderful Life*…the message that Peggy Sue—and all of us—are meant to receive is not that our lives are necessarily wonderful, but that,

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who like George, 'is given the chance to go back to her past and erase her destiny,' she is 'unlike George, who never doubted his love for Mary [Donna Reed]' (Levy, 1991, p. 243). Instead, Peggy Sue is filled with doubt and uncertainty about both her marriage and her future.

Maio (1988, p. 193), for instance, claims that Peggy Sue 'doesn't even have the same comfort' that Capra gave George, who 'is at least shown what a miserable place the world would have been without him.' However, '[t]he only comfort Peggy Sue is given is that of a possible reconciliation with Crazy Charlie, the Appliance King' (ibid.). With Peggy Sue, the film confronts the illusory separation of the American family from the marketplace, as couched in Reaganomics and the championed attitudes of *laissez-faire* capitalism. However, the film also seems to highlight—if not champion—the indispensable dimension of consumerism.

Unlike George Bailey's story, *Peggy Sue Got Married* offers a different take on his wife, Mary. Peggy Sue is very unlike Mary Bailey. She is a woman who owns a successful bakery, has two loving children, and marries Charlie right out of high school because she was pregnant. And unlike George, Charlie cheats on his wife. How could this have happened to a former prom queen who has now been crowned queen of her 25th high school reunion?

When her friend Carol (Catherine Hicks) comments: 'You know, I always thought that you and Charlie had a really great marriage,' Peggy Sue replies: 'Oh, I think we did. We just got married too young and ended up blaming each other for all the things we missed.' And here again her journey into the past is very different from Marty's in *Back to the Future*: she is given another chance to realise her teen dreams, whereas Marty was fighting for his very existence. The problem is that Peggy Sue avoids the riskiest and most potentially rewarding choice in her extraordinary opportunity—which becomes a contentious point for some of the film's sharpest critics.

Once she finds herself stuck in 1960, instead of panicking like Marty does when he is returned in time, Peggy Sue begins to relish and cherish every moment with 'the adolescent enthusiasm that has been stifled in her mid-life soul' (ibid.): eating breakfast with her family, watching TV with her sister, and bursting out to

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whatever our lives have been, they couldn't have happened any other way, simply because they didn't happen any other way.'

sing, 'My country tis of thee,' in her high school homeroom. For Corliss (1986b, p. 16), the message is clear: 'The movie is a plea to treasure life's ordinary gifts, to see the routine of school days, family phone calls, pajama parties, even Mom's mantra to "be a good girl," as precious things, precisely because they can't last.' It certainly is in tandem with Reagan's persistently sunny speeches about the nation's future.

However, like *Back to the Future*, the film is not only a postmodern text: it also serves simultaneously as an endorsement as well as a subtle critique of the artificial symbolic class of life embodied in Reaganism. When Peggy Sue awakens from her coma at the end of the film, she gives Charlie another chance. She is willing to restore the man as the head of the family and herself as his subservient wife.[188] However, by capitalising upon the timeless nature of the mental processes of the unconscious, Peggy Sue remembers the *eros* of her passion and overcomes the boundaries of repression in rediscovering her sense of humanity. This allows us to dig deeper into the inner core of the film's texts and contexts, and to envision how the critique of family values as portrayed in *Peggy Sue Got Married* moves well beyond the polarising gender and sexual politics of the 1980s into a broader examination of the troubled and troubling relationships the American family has with consumerism and capitalism as championed during the 1980s.

5.2 Reuniting the Nuclear Family

Although Peggy Sue is given the opportunity to change her life, she really doesn't do anything differently: she goes into the past and chooses to marry Charlie again. Perhaps it is because she has newfound insight into his character, realising just how important Charlie's dream of becoming the next Dion[189] means to him. However, what is the film trying to say about women, marriage, and family in 1960s

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[188] Levy (1991, p. 242) supports this claim in his assertion that the film stresses 'the values of the family…over personal fulfillment. Preaching sacrifice and resignation, the film is conservative in its ideology, favoring marriage…over divorce, and family life over singlehood.'

[189] Dion and the Belmonts were a leading American singing group of the late 1950s, led by singer Dion DiMucci, and best know for their 1959 hit single, 'Where or When' (Rodgers and Hart, 1937).

America?[190] The rhetoric of Reagan and the New Right in the 1980s resurrected the traditional American family version, but it also effectively sheared away some of its most traditional elements, such as the extended family model, its economic emphasis on shared labour, and patriarchal hierarchy where women and children had been relegated to subordinate roles.

Within the fantasy text, the film attempts to resolve this social and political displacement. But we are distracted from this ideology due to the ambiguity of Peggy Sue's time travel. Remember, Peggy Sue did not choose to travel back in time—it suddenly happened to her. Was it a dream brought on by her unknown heart condition? But if it was just a dream, how could Michael have written a book dedicated to her if she had not actually gone back in time and slept with him? In making sense of the choices, we can see many imaginary discourses, although intricately subtle in many instances, that go beyond the evident nostalgic connections between the 1950s and the 1980s in the film.

When Peggy Sue finds herself in 1960 giving blood in high school, the film limits her choices to the following: she can pursue her long-held dream of becoming a dancer; she can run off to Utah and raise chickens with the bohemian Michael Fitzsimmons; she can accept Richard's marriage proposal and find financial success; or she can choose to either marry Charlie or remain single. Importantly, all of these choices—aside from dancing—depend upon her forming a relationship with a man, and, except for her 'fling' with Michael, they include marriage.[191]

For Bartosch (1987, online), 'Peggy Sue's liaison with Michael' is 'a "gift" to the women in the audience and a small gesture toward the yet-to-emerge sexual revolution and the collective libido.' Caputi (2005, p. 25) gives an interesting reading of the Fitzsimmons character in that as he portrays a 'renegade beat who despises the decade's [1950s] mainstream,' he represents the 'disaffection for the

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[190] For Bartosch (1987, online), the narrative structure of *Peggy Sue Got Married* 'displaces the contemporary issue of divorce onto the past.' It 'depends on a story within a story. The contemporary story frames the film, and in the body of the film, the story is the past.'

[191] For Bawer (1992, pp. 37-38), *Peggy Sue Got Married* not only 'seeks to demystify the future, the film deromanticizes the past.' That is, 'Peggy Sue comes to learn…that she was mistaken to think that life, back in high school, had offered her an infinite number of choices. It didn't, according to the guiding philosophy of this film, for life has brought Peggy Sue to where she is now, and was never going to take her anywhere else.'

decade.'[192] So when Michael tells Peggy Sue that 'he will one day "check out of this bourgeois motel, push myself away from the dinner table and say, 'No more Jell-O[193] for me, ma!'"' he 'draws attention to those who sought refuge in the beat culture,' for whom 'the strictures of the dominant culture spelled a spiritual death from which it was necessary to escape' (ibid.).[194] Peggy Sue's extramarital tryst—and therefore transgression—'becomes a fantasy bribe for funneling Peggy Sue's sexuality into the marital/procreative framework' (Bartosch, 1987, online). Despite the fact that Charlie is devastated when he finds out about Michael, he ultimately forgives her, thereby reasserting his devotion to Peggy Sue.

Peggy Sue Got Married pulls the earlier decade forward as a back text into the 1980s by giving Peggy Sue her autonomous, self-directed voice to speak her own experience by challenging authority and refusing to be an obedient teenager in 1960.[195] And sexually, the adult Peggy Sue is out to break the rules as well.[196] While Peggy Sue flirts with a renegade attitude, Charlie tries to uphold the promise he made to her father, who told him: 'Show her a good time. But for heaven's sake, restrain yourself!'

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[192] Caputi (2005, p. 25) adds: he is the product of 'the renegade elements of 1950s culture' who 'sought to resist the dominant paradigm, which was neither as charming nor as rewarding as the right contends.'

[193] A popular gelatin dessert that 'once given its trademarked name, Jell-O quickly became "America's Most Famous Dessert" with more than one million boxes sold every day by the late 1990s. Even more than apple pie or hot dogs, Jell-O epitomizes not just American cuisine, but America itself and has been one of its more enduring icons' (Woloson, 2002, online).

[194] We should also consider that Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, the literary icon of the Beat Generation, was published in 1957 with immediate success. It is interesting to note that it is less a sense of disaffection than it is a sense of restlessness that needs to be quenched and satisfied. In fact, Kerouac was uncomfortable with being labeled as the leader of the Beat Generation. Others, like Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Gregory Corso, were more revolutionary than Kerouac, for example, who still embraced his Catholicism as part of his spiritual quest.

[195] Consider, for example, the scene in which Peggy Sue tells her algebra teacher, Mr. Snelgrove (Ken Graham): '…I happen to know that in the future, I will not have the slightest use for algebra. And I speak from experience.' Or when she tells her father (Don Murray), after drinking alcohol in front of him—'I'm an adult. I want to have fun. I'm gonna go to Liverpool and discover the Beatles!'

[196] For example, she ignores her mother's (Barbara Harris) advice: 'Peggy, you know what a penis is? Stay away from it!' and when she shocks Charlie with her risqué behaviour in the car: '…doesn't Lucky Chucky want to come out? …Your love machine. Your throbbing thrill hammer. Your thing.'

Non-conformity stretches only so far as *Peggy Sue Got Married* seems, in some respects, to promote 'traditional' family values. However, what it ignores ideologically is just as important—the 'unsaid' text reveals and reflects, as did *Back to the Future*, Reagan's reliance on 'forgetting' the past. As Coontz (1992, 2000, p. x) acknowledges: 'Families have always been in flux, and often in crisis.' Despite this film's attempt to create a nostalgic, rosy tint on the 1960s American family, 'there was no golden age of family life' (ibid.), particularly for women. In fact, '[w]omen who failed to conform to the June Cleaver…role of housewife and mother were severely criticized' and 'often denied the right to serve on juries, convey property, make contracts…and establish credit in their own names' (McWilliams, 1996, online). In short, a woman had to depend upon a man in order to survive and prosper in the 'American Dream.'

When Peggy Sue first enters her childhood home, she is overwhelmed with nostalgia and enjoys reliving her relationship with her parents and sister, Nancy (Sophia Coppola), with whom she watches *American Bandstand*[197] on television. As Clarke-Copeland (2007, online) points out, popular television shows of the 1960s 'reflected good, old fashioned ideas of family values. Controversy was not up for discussion.' As discussed in Chapter 3, Peggy Sue's mother, Evelyn Kelcher, fulfills the June Cleaver ideal, as does Betty Parker in *Pleasantville*. But she is very much unlike Marty's mother, Lorraine Baines, in *Back to the Future*.[198] However, unlike June Cleaver and Betty Parker, she does question the authority of her husband—to a point. Consider, for example, the scene in which Peggy Sue's father, Jack Kelcher, comes home with an unexpected surprise for his family: a brand new Edsel,[199] a car that contributes to the nostalgic 1960s atmosphere of the film.

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[197] *American Bandstand* (Bonaduce, 1957-1989) was a popular live television show that featured teenagers dancing to Top-40 type music introduced by host Dick Clark and popularised many dance styles.

[198] According to Clarke-Copeland (2007, online): Peggy Sue's mother is a 'housewife…dressed in a freshly pressed dress, pearls, high heels, and make up while doing her chores, baking cookies, making meals, and tending after [her] children.'

[199] The Ford Edsel was first introduced in the U.S. in 1957 and became famous as a marketing disaster due to its poor styling and reception by the American public. The name 'Edsel' became a popular joke as an acronym—'Everyday Something Else Leaks'—which was inspired by the car's failure. Subsequently, U.S. films, television programs, cartoons, and video games have all used the Edsel as humour, usually as a quick joke or as a sight gag.

Instead of telling her husband—'Oh, honey. What a nice surprise!'—as Betty would surely tell George, she tells Nancy to stop playing with the horn: 'Don't wear it out, Nancy. We can't afford a new car. We have to take it back.' And when Jack scolds Peggy for being drunk, Evelyn rebukes him: 'You're making a mountain out of a molehill, a tempest in a teapot.' Later, we find her pawning some of her jewelry in order to make some extra cash, and she is even willing to lie to Peggy Sue to keep her husband from finding out.[200] These actions and words TV viewers certainly never heard nor saw from June Cleaver. While they are only small ripples in a larger rhetorical discourse that pits conservatism against the arch-enemy of liberalism, there is also the suggestion that perhaps all of us are both conservative and liberal if and when we reach our fully mature adulthood.

Reagan's demonisation of the Soviet Union as an 'Evil Empire' or the appropriation of 'welfare queen'[201] to characterise the abuse of governmental benefits emboldened many segments of his constituent base to deploy their own tools of rhetorical assault in 'culture war' issues that spanned the racial, ethnic, and cultural minority spectrum. Rather than be aimed at bridging ideological gaps in public issues, the culture war rhetoric solidified an identity wholly antagonistic to the prevailing sociopolitical culture and which preferred division and enmity over collegiality. On the other hand, there have been those small ripples suggesting the type of mature political thinking as detailed in the film's scene description above. Indeed, the secular paths of conservative and liberal can converge in the aggregated experiences that constitute one's emotional, intellectual, and philosophical maturity. It is the ultimate capacity that the choice between conservative and liberal is a false one, a pseudo-war fomented by those who stand to profit by the manufactured conflict.[202]

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[200] Evelyn tells Peggy Sue: 'That was nobody…I'm voting for the Democrats this year. You know how your father feels about Democrats. That was a polltaker. I wouldn't mention it to him if I were you.'

[201] See Conclusion.

[202] A good example comes from the current debate about marriage, especially about the legislation of same-sex unions. Making the argument in the recent U.S. federal case that California's Proposition 8, which bans same-sex marriage, was unconstitutional were the two opposing attorneys in the 2000 U.S. Supreme Court case that ultimately decided the electoral campaign between George W. Bush and Al Gore. Ted Olsen, a Republican attorney who started working with the U.S. Justice Department during the Reagan years, joined with David Boies, who argued on behalf

Unfortunately, in *Peggy Sue Got Married*, Evelyn cannot be viewed as an independent, self-actualised, modern woman. This becomes quite apparent in the scene in which Peggy Sue is having breakfast with her family and asks her mother to sit down and join them. Peggy Sue's mother, who responds—'You want me to sit?'—is completely taken aback by this simple request, so accustomed to her role as a mother and housewife who *serves* her family. Still, however clichéd this nostalgic image of the 'ideal' American family may be, 'a father and a mother, bound to each other by legal marriage, raising children bound to them by biology, is a stubborn relic, a national symbol that has yet to be retired as threadbare and somewhat unrealistic' (Benfer, 2001, online). Americans still want to believe that the nuclear family and traditional family values are an integral part of what makes America strong.

We must remember, however, that Peggy Sue has come from 1986, a time when the American nuclear family and traditional family values were seemingly in peril[203]—despite the Republican Party's and the Christian far-right's pleas to restore the nation's family values. Peggy Sue's own marriage and family had collapsed. The sanctuary from the brutalities of the outside world had been compromised. Reassuring comfort was couched in easily definable and readily solvable explanations of how and why the stability of the family would rectify all of America's social, economic, and cultural ills.

Furthermore, Peggy Sue tells her grandfather: 'You know, when you and Grandma are gone, the family's gone.' For Babington (1998, p. 96):

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of Gore. Many observers noted that both men in the course of the 2010 federal case involving California's Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriage, exhibited the same traits found ten years earlier in the Supreme Court case that decided the presidential election in Bush's favour. That is, the legal counsel team of Olson and Boies was principled, humane, calm, smart, broad-minded, pragmatic, courteous, and inclusive.

[203] Marriage rates actually increased in the 1980s and divorce rates fell from their peak in the late 1970s. According to Stevenson and Wolfers (2007, online): 'Divorce rates rose sharply, doubling between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. During this period, family life was potentially altered by many factors: the rise of the women's liberation movement; the sexual revolution; the Supreme Court's granting of marriage as a "fundamental" right under the U.S. Constitution and thus the abolition of laws restricting marriage between races; the elimination in many states of fault-based divorce; and a sharp rise in women's labor force participation.'

> Peggy's overtly oneric return to the grandparents' house amounts to a dream within a dream, and unlike the space of Peggy's parents' home, also viewed through a subjective amber haze, the dream is unbroken by the kind of critique that plays around the Kelchers. This critique resists the simple accusation that the point of the time trip is to conflate the mid-1980s with the conservative 1950s.

However, this is problematic because Peggy's overly idealised grandparents do not really represent the idealised 1950s (Leon Ames was 83-years-old and the grandmother, Maureen O'Sullivan, was 75). Instead, they are 'people who would have been in their prime in the 1930s' (ibid.). In truth, the extended family—which Peggy Sue's grandparents represent—was 'all but dead' (ibid.) by 1960.[204] Thus, 'what is given is not a statement of historical changelessness, but a process narrowed down to the nuclear family by the end of the film' (ibid.). And even Peggy Sue's nuclear family at the end of the film is, as Babington puts it, 'depleted' (ibid.).

Perhaps Peggy Sue's decision to reunite with Charlie is not a sign of resignation or weakness: could she simply be choosing the most pragmatic solution when faced with the inevitable death of her hopes and dreams? And because Peggy Sue is, after all, a mother when she finds herself in 1960, shouldn't we expect her to choose the path that will ensure the birth of her future children? I disagree with Bick's (1996, p. 900) assessment that 'part of the film's agenda' is 'its depiction of Peggy Sue as a mother and specifically as one in a covert rivalry with her daughter,' Beth. Bick bases her assumption on the scenes just before and at the beginning of the high school reunion.

For example, the movie opens with Peggy Sue getting dressed with the help of her daughter, who has to encourage her to go to the reunion despite her reservations and complaints about Charlie, whom Beth feels compelled to protect and support. From the beginning, we learn that Peggy Sue has failed as a wife. Charlie has left her for Janet (Ginger Taylor), whom we must assume (she never appears in the film) is both younger and prettier than Peggy Sue. However, as she

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[204] Today, however, this claim can be easily contested. In fact, the extended family phenomenon has been steadily increasing. For example, the U.S. Census reports that 6.5 million children live in an extended household in which at least one grandparent is present. The extended family designation apparently has been sustained for economic and social reasons and necessities. However, it still remains true that most children in the U.S. live in two-parent homes (See Roberts, S., 2008, online).

returns to the final days of her high school years, Peggy Sue not only relives those experiences with emotional intensity, she does so with an awareness she has gained over the past 25 years. Struggling not to repeat what she knows will be a difficult and painful life experience, she is led, nevertheless, to the same place that she was at in her original last days at her iconic American high school.

The scenes to which Bick refers are more pertinently foreshadowing the symbolic cinematic form of psychoanalysis impulse that frames much of the film. Peggy Sue's 'essential "goodness" is reaffirmed,' according to Bick, 'by her daughter, who…dresses her in her silvery prom dress, transforming her into the rightful queen (good mother) Peggy Sue believes herself to be' (ibid., p. 899). Bick goes so far as to suggest that the comment made by Maddy (Joan Allen) and her husband Arthur (Wil Shriner)—'Which one's the mother, and which one's the daughter?'—as well as Charlie's friends commenting on the shared beauty of Beth and Peggy Sue, 'render ambiguous which comment refers to whom' (ibid., p. 900). According to Bick, Beth seems to be 'taking Peggy Sue's place on Charlie's arm(s)' (ibid.). While Bick envisions the scene in terms of the anger and anxiety that might be anticipated from a woman who is about to be divorced from her estranged, unfaithful husband, it is more appropriately viewed as the bridging scene that leads Peggy Sue toward the essential honesty of remembering past experiences she had repressed.

The emotional remembering on Peggy Sue's part strengthens her capacity to come to terms with her husband. Therefore, the daughter, Beth, is acting more as an ideological catalyst in getting her mother and father reunited in order to restore the nuclear family unit. Despite both Beth's ambivalent remark, 'Lots of people are separated and divorced'—as if that was something to be considered *normal*—deep down, Beth wants Peggy Sue and Charlie to make amends; after all, they are her parents. This becomes apparent in the final scene of the film in which Peggy Sue awakens from her 'dream' to find Charlie at her side. Coppola seems to want us to realise that Peggy Sue has chosen 'reality' over her 'dreams.' For Bawer (1992, p. 38): 'The film, in short, takes on the theme of fate vs. free will and comes down strongly on the side of fate.'[205] However, Bawer is clearly suggesting a different take

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[205] Bawer (1992, p. 38) adds: 'But it's not darkly or nihilistically fatalistic…On the contrary, it's a film in which the heroine learns to live in the present, not in the past

than Levy's earlier connection about the film's fatalistic philosophy. Beth is quick to tell her mother, 'Dad's been here everyday,' to which Charlie adds: 'Because I love you…and I need you, Peggy Sue.' But lest we get caught up in the nostalgic romance in this scene, Peggy Sue sees Charlie for whom he really is: a man who has been utterly defeated by his philandering ways.

In addition to Peggy Sue's emotional epiphany, there is also the restored sense of orderly time that ultimately makes room for the redemption of the traditional American family. Charlie tells Peggy Sue: 'I would cut my right arm off for another chance.' And that is exactly what the message of this movie gives us: another chance for America is possible, but only if 'the family' retakes its rightful place as a world power under the loving guidance of leaders such as Ronald Reagan, who believe in the family as the essential core of national exceptionalism. Even though Peggy Sue tells Charlie, 'I…need some time,' we can be sure that her invitation to Charlie 'to your house for dinner on Sunday…with your kids,' suggests that she will ultimately forgive him and reintegrate her family.

Gone now are Peggy Sue's idealised grandparents, whom we only got to see in their old age and so can only remember them as kind, old people.[206] In addition, Marchant (2007, p. 163) makes an interesting—and sympathetic—point in how the film 'sheds considerable light on the primary reason Peggy Sue and Charlie are contemplating divorce as adults': simply put, '[b]ecause they married so young, they missed out on a lot of what life has to offer.'[207] However, the film has been harshly condemned by several feminist critics who see Peggy Sue's inability—whether by choice or by the film's predetermined framework—to change her future for the

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or the future; learns the proper relation between the person she was and the person she is now. She learns, in short, to accept her life because it is, simply enough, all hers; she has created it; character is fate.'

[206] But as Babington (1998, p. 97) rightly points out, we are asked to forget that, in real life, Peggy Sue's grandparents would have been 'struggling with the socio-sexual changes and expanding divorce rate of the 1920s and 1930s,' as well as 'the frailties of the next two generations.'

[207] Marchant (2007, p. 163) elaborates: 'Even though this was their choice, it had to have been painful to endure, especially in the early years of their marriage, the free-wheeling 1960s with its sexual revolution and other liberating social changes. The constraints of traditional marriage no doubt kept them from experiencing many of the things that others of their generation so readily reveled in. And, sadly, they blamed one another for what they missed out on, not realizing that they each created those circumstances out of their own choices.'

'better' (the meaning of which is, in itself, highly debatable depending on one's relative social, political, and/or economic position) as a slap in the face, so to speak, of the progress made by women since the women's rights movement began in the 1960s.

The family tableau in the final scene is also incomplete in that Beth's brother Scott (Randy Borne) is absent.[208] But why is Scott absent? For Babington (1998, p. 97), 'there is a fugitive logic about Scott's absence in that Charlie, the incorrigible eternally adolescent romantic lover, both heroic and grotesque, could be said to fill his place.' In addition, both Scott's absence and 'Charlie's marginalisation at the end, act out a micro-allegory of male displacement from the centre, about which the tone of the film is enigmatic' (ibid.). Still, this ending clearly emphasises family over the romantic couple.

Beth and her absent brother Scott are now adults in their twenties. Therefore, a divorce between Peggy Sue and Charlie would not affect them as negatively as it would if they were still small children in need of parental love and nurturing. Thus, there is no 'fundamental social rationale' (ibid., p. 98) for this family to remain together. But the point is, they *do* stay together. Once again, Reagan's 1986 message echoes with dominating cogency: '…the family…remains the fundamental unit of American life.' Indeed, family is sacred—and it must be maintained at all cost, even if that means 'forgetting' or 'ignoring' its shortfalls and failings.

Arising from the film's enigmatic tone is an awareness of the artificiality of the conservative-liberal divide: maturity versus immaturity, selflessness versus selfishness, disinterested truth versus power at any price. In 1980, there were Reagan Democrats who crossed the ideological divide, hoping for a statesman able to breach the political gridlock that frustrated both sides of the aisle.[209] Twenty-eight years later, many independent voters—including those who had described themselves as Reagan Democrats—cast their ballots for Obama, hoping for a prudential judge of national affairs. The question remains whether, in the larger sphere, individualism can trump selfishness.

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[208] In fact, he is absent throughout the entire film, although he is mentioned and remains in the credits.

[209] See 'The Election of 1980 and the Reagan Era.' *The Historian in Politics*, 05 December 2007. [online] Available at: http://socyberty.com/politics/the-election-of-1980-and-the-reagan-era/ [Accessed 23 August 2011].

5.3 Greed is Good?

Gordon Gecko's (Michael Douglas) oft-repeated quote, '…greed is good. Greed is right,' in the film *Wall Street* (Stone, O., 1987), accurately reflects Reagan's pro-business presidency and the bull market of the 1980s. When the 1980s came to a close, the decade was often summed up using Gecko's words—so much so that the major U.S. television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) repeatedly used Gecko's image in their reviews of the 1980s.[210] But what does this have to do with *Peggy Sue Got Married*, a film that seems to be saying that the family—as long as it is headed by a man—comes first? By taking a closer look at the film's perspective, we find that Peggy Sue is selective in how she describes the past 25 years to Richard.

In addition to revealing her personal history with Charlie, she enthusiastically reports technological achievements and product developments. Sure, it is great that there have been successful heart transplants, that babies have been conceived in test tubes, and that men have walked on the moon, but Peggy Sue seems more excited about the possibility of making Richard and herself rich using her knowledge of future commodities: running shoes, microwave ovens, pocket calculators, digital watches, miniature television sets, and 'huge' radios. While Richard is at first taken aback by this information, he quickly jumps on the money-making bandwagon.

Materialism is the safe haven removed from the psychological and emotional stresses of relationships, fidelity, sexuality, and uncertainties about the genuine underlying forces of love. So excited is Peggy Sue about the prospect of getting rich, she runs into a women's clothing store and asks the sales clerk if they carry pantyhose.[211] And when she finds out they don't, she exclaims to Richard: 'I've decided on our first fortune.' For Peggy Sue and Richard, it seems that greed *is* good. However, it is important to note that while Richard—a man—does in fact become wealthy in the future, Peggy Sue's decision to return to 1986 and reunite with Charlie prevents any chance for her to profit financially from her 'trip' back in time.

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[210] See Graham (2007, online).

[211] Allen Grant Sr. of Glen Raven Mills introduced pantyhose in 1959. In 1965, Glen Raven Mills introduced a seam-free version of pantyhose, which coincided with the introduction of the miniskirt.

Peggy Sue already had squandered at least one significant opportunity to experience life differently with the beatnik Fitzsimmons, who was the film's iconic representation of the destructiveness of materialism and conformity. As appealing as Richard and Fitzsimmons would seem as alternative partners for Peggy Sue, both characters also exemplify the narcissistic tendencies that despise time, the same forces which set the stage for Peggy Sue's honest efforts to remember her own sense of humanity, and to find the sensible ground upon which to understand the humanity of others, especially her estranged husband's. On the other hand, Richard and Fitzsimmons find their emancipating forces within their own worlds of narcissism, mustering the courage to define their own subversive individualism. Richard becomes extremely wealthy, smart and passionate, the gatekeeper of a newly globalised tech-savvy economy. Fitzsimmons is satisfied to be the unencumbered free-wheeling writer. Peggy Sue, however, is merely satisfied with the courage to make sense of her husband's infidelity and to no longer be hurt or injured by it.

For Peggy Sue, the lifting of her repressed memories was limited to her own particular circumstances. All of the excitement had seeped out by what Peggy Sue left out of her description of the past 25 years: the social turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the fight for women's and civil rights. Does she try to warn Martin Luther King that he shouldn't go to Memphis on April 4, 1968 or face assassination? No. In *Peggy Sue Got Married*, the 'movements of history become defined solely in terms of technology and commodities—twenty-five years of social, political, and economic history become repressed' (Bartosch, 1987, online). Just like Marty in *Back to the Future*, instead of using this unique time travel opportunity to intervene in history—to actually make a difference in making the world a better place to live—Peggy Sue does nothing: 'She acts historically only in a business and a personal context' (ibid.). She only succeeds in fulfilling her destiny and helping Richard achieve his, just as Marty only acted to ensure his own survival and transform his 'loser' family into one of success.[212]

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[212] We should keep in mind, however, that in the sequel, *Back to the Future II* (Zemeckis, 1989), Marty buys a sports almanac containing the outcomes of 50 years worth (1950-2000) of sporting events, with the intent to make money betting on games—an attempt that is thwarted by Doc Brown but later successfully used by Biff.

While not appropriating the tone of Gordon Gecko's turbocharged exultation in *Wall Street* about the goodness and the rightness of greed, *Peggy Sue Got Married* echoed the more affable, personable tone of Reagan's message that one's self-interest was justified, especially for the purposes of empowering the individual to reap for his or her family the symbols and manifestations of the American Dream and economic success. Absent of irony or satire, the film engendered a gentler yet still disturbingly skewed view of Reaganism, and a championing of capitalism with no worries about wider social or ethical responsibilities.

5.4 Conclusion

Peggy Sue Got Married promotes a Reagan-friendly ideology in the way that it is pro-marriage/anti-divorce, and in how it promotes 'traditional' (i.e. male-based) family values. The film reflects, in part, the ideology of the radical Right, the so-called 'Moral Majority,'[213] and its evangelical, Christian-based, lobbyist agenda—a group with so much political clout that it gave Ronald Reagan two-thirds of the white evangelical vote in his 1980 defeat of Jimmy Carter.[214] In this context, the film completely ignores the group's, and Reagan's, efforts to outlaw abortion,[215] its opposition to the women's rights movement, the Equal Rights Amendment,[216] the

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[213] The Moral Majority was a U.S. political organisation with an evangelical, Christian-oriented agenda of political lobbying. It was founded in 1979 and was dissolved in the late 1980s. Its founding by Jerry Falwell was a key step in establishing the New Christian Right. See Wuthnow and Liebman (1983).

[214] In the late 1970s, the Christian Right registered several million new voters to vote for Ronald Reagan. In 1980, when Reagan won with only 26 percent of the eligible electorate, white evangelical voters accounted for two-thirds of Reagan's ten-point lead over Jimmy Carter (Diamond, 1995, online).

[215] Despite his conservative ideology and pact with the religious Right, Reagan's desire to outlaw abortion was never seriously pursued (Green, 2003, online).

[216] In July 1980, during platform hearings, the Republican Party reversed its 40-year tradition of support for the ERA. In January 1981, Ronald Reagan became the first U.S. president opposed to a constitutional amendment providing equal rights for women. By March, leading pollsters were claiming 'Ronald Reagan has a woman problem' on ERA ('Chronology of the Equal Rights Amendment, 1923-1996.' National Organization for Women). [online] Available at: http://www.now.org/issues/economic/cea/history.html [Accessed 08 April 2008]. However, it should also be noted that Reagan is credited with naming the first woman, Sandra Day O'Conner, to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1981.

Strategic Arms Limitation Talks,[217] and its attempts to demonise homosexuality and view AIDS as a 'just' punishment for being gay.[218] The film also reflects 1980's 'New Patriotism,'[219] which is clearly visible in Peggy Sue's robust rendition of 'America'[220] at school. Underneath the film's nostalgic veneer, *Peggy Sue Got Married* represents—perhaps inadvertently—a compelling endorsement of Ronald Reagan's, and the country's, political swing to the right, while ignoring the most important economic, political, and social issues.

Feminist critics also have been especially harsh on the film.[221] As a grown, mature woman, Peggy Sue's potential outside her marriage with Charlie is given little attention, though we do learn that she runs a successful bakery. By choosing to stay with the obviously imperfect Charlie, the films seems to reverse the gains made in the women's rights movement. *Peggy Sue Got Married*, like *Back to the Future*, underscores Reagan-centric ideology in suggesting that the nuclear family must be preserved at all costs, even at the expense of a woman's freedom and happiness, and of missed opportunities to escape the dull, quotidian, pre-determined bourgeois life. As in *Back to the Future*, the promise of *Peggy Sue Got Married* carried the broadly proven popular appeal of positioning the cinematic image of youth perched

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[217] In May 1982, U.S. President Ronald Reagan, an opponent of SALT II, advanced his own proposal for a strategic arms reduction treaty, calling for deep cuts in land-based missiles (in which the USSR was perceived to hold an advantage). This became the U.S. negotiating position at Geneva, which remained solid despite numerous Soviet protests, and eventually led to direct talks between President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and the signing of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in December 1987 ('Strategic Arms Reduction Talks.' The History Channel, 2008). [online] Available at: http://www.history.com/encyclopedia.do?articleId=223220 [Accessed 08 April 2008].

[218] Advocates for people with AIDS have long asserted that Reagan's lack of leadership on the disease significantly hindered research and education efforts to fight it (Toner and Pear, 2004, online).

[219] In Reagan's (1989, online) 'Farewell Address to the Nation,' he warned of the 'eradication of the American memory,' which, he believed, could cause 'the erosion of the American spirit.' Reagan went on to state: 'Finally, there is a great tradition of warnings in presidential farewells, and I've got one that's been on my mind for some time. But oddly enough, it starts with one of the things I'm proudest of in the past eight years: the resurgence of national pride that I called the new patriotism.'

[220] Although popularly known as 'America,' the true title of the song is 'My Country, 'Tis of Thee,' written by Samuel Francis Smith in 1831.

[221] See Maio (1988, pp. 192-193), Kinder (1989, p. 9), and McCreadie (1990, pp. 31-32).

precariously on the border between childhood and adulthood. On the surface, the film served an ideal platform for arguing that the nuclear family should—and could—be preserved.

However, nothing really gets resolved in this film, and we are left with a depiction of just how far removed from ideal Peggy Sue's marriage really is. The only certainty is that status and popularity, as well as reconciliation—whether one is a teenager or an adult—is or can be derived from being fully socialised into the principles of a highly competitive market society. She fails to achieve a different reality that would include implicitly the halt to time, the opportunity for her to find a totally satisfied sense of perfection with the same degree of courage embodied by Richard Fitzsimmons. Maio (1988, pp. 192-193) laments over the fact that unlike Marty McFly, a 'successful' male time-traveler, the female time-traveler Peggy Sue appears to be 'passive in and little enriched by her re-exploration of the past.' When Peggy Sue wakes up, she is certainly no more empowered than, for example, Dorothy (Judy Garland), when she awakens at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Yet, these same fatalistic elements—that Peggy Sue has no power at all over her past nor the future—of which some of these same critics and others lament[222]—constitute potentially subversive challenges to the Reagan rhetorical peroration about the American Dream being equally accessible to all who aspire toward it. Critics can turn these lamentations into incisive and deeply critical commentaries that can expose the utter incoherence of Reagan's promise that contemporary Americans could, in effect, have it all—both in terms of healthy families and economic prosperity. The same echoes of Peggy Sue's clash between endless riches and mediocre economic status also are felt in *The Family Man* (discussed in Chapter 7), a film that also turns the Reagan-inspired notion of 'greed is good' on its head.

In fact, it is impossible to reconcile the Reaganesque rhetoric because it is not only women who are powerless in *Peggy Sue Got Married*. Men also take comfort in materialism as their safe haven from the emotional and psychological stresses of family relationships, the tensions arising from surviving economically in an always-volatile business world, and of proving their professional worth. Morris (2000, pp. 122-123), who describes the men as weak, insubstantial, and immature, claims they 'have their sights set on realistic goals: homes and cars, barbecues every weekend.'

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[222] See Levy (1991) and Bawer (1992).

Reagan's success at forging a new political coalition was predicated on his strongly optimistic orientation toward the future, which ironically, would not resemble the harsher antagonistic tone taken by today's neoconservatives who have appropriated their own mythological version of Reagan's legacy. What often is overlooked is the oversimplification of that optimism, which carried over into Reagan's policies, and which failed to address the still-entrenched problems of a market economy unapproachable for millions of Americans. Reagan's plain eloquence was easily twisted into a protective rhetorical code for self-serving interests. Individual interests are manifestations of being free, but they do not constitute the whole of our liberty. Reagan was so out of touch with reality that he failed to stress the collective nature of our political governing and our personal obligations within this process.

Peggy Sue seems initially to be somewhat empowered—particularly in her relationship with Charlie: she knows his future weaknesses and failures, and she is 'in charge' sexually. However, despite waking up a high school teenager again, she is still the same person: a 43-year-old, burned-out, on-the-verge-of-divorce, woman. Peggy Sue is able to retrace her steps in the past, but she remains the same subordinated woman.

Admittedly, searching for those subversive anti-Reagan elements in Peggy Sue must be centered almost exclusively on these limited fatalistic contexts. Dunn (1986, online), on the other hand, gives a more positive—if not distinctly Reaganesque—slant in his review of the film, claiming: 'As an exploration of personal dreams and wishes, it reveals that what we are is often the best of what we could possibly have been.' Because Peggy Sue goes back to her old life and is willing to forgive her philandering husband, the film re-legitimises the traditional notions of American family life as a social institution. However, I do not accept Dunn's premise that it represents our best potential.

The film refuses to view the turbulent 1960s and 1970s as a period of healthy self-doubt and self-interrogation. Instead, it attempts to offer us solace in its fatalistic nostalgic depiction of a 'better' past which, as this study has by now shown, never really existed. Unfortunately, Peggy Sue will never reap the full benefits of pleasure from a sense of timelessness, being only connected to her intuitive, instinctive,

subconscious experiences for the extremely limited purposes of making sense of the shortcomings in her marriage.

The next chapter will examine *Big*, another male-based 'time-travel' fantasy film in which 12-year-old Josh Baskin wakes up one morning and finds himself in his adult body, but without the wisdom of adulthood that Peggy Sue brought back to her teen years. *Big*, like *Peggy Sue Got Married*, also promotes the importance of choosing family and home, but it does so by rejecting the capitalistic ideology of the Reagan years.

Chapter 6:
Case Study #4 of *Big*

6.1 Introduction

Penny Marshall's first major success as a Hollywood director came with her 1988 release of *Big*, a fantasy story starring Tom Hanks as Josh Baskin, a 12-year-old boy trapped in his 35-year-old body. This film represents a different sort of 'time travel' in that while Josh's transformation from childhood to adulthood is instantaneous (he goes to sleep as a child and awakes as an adult), the time does not change. He does not go to the past or to the future, but merely changes physically. Josh, while still a child, must now deal with the adult world, and thus the film provides a 'provocative study of male gender roles' (Foster, 1995, p. 243) as he reacts to the adult responsibilities thrust upon him.

The film is filled with many time-worn clichés, but Marshall's riffs on these give an astonishingly refreshing and deft interpretation. For example, when the adult Josh is working on a corporate presentation with Susan (Elizabeth Perkins), a coworker who has fallen in love with him, he defuses her difficult question about where their relationship is going by bopping her head playfully with a rolled magazine. No doubt Tom Hanks' portrayal of Josh emphasises the charming quality of lost innocence without indulging his performance so that we never lose sight of the fact that we are watching a young teen male in the film. Likewise, Santo Loquasto's production design, coupled with Barry Sonnenfield's camera work, pulls viewers into Josh's vibrantly coloured, toyland universe—nearly to the extent that we are on the verge of drowning in a pool of motley hued balls or a favourite children's breakfast cereal like Trix or Froot Loops.[223]

As a postmodern, de-centered protagonist, Josh is presented as a subtle combination of responsible manhood, bedeviled and perplexed by the essential need for conformity, and of unconventional manhood which challenges the need for conformity as well as the need to take on the mantle of responsibility and work on behalf of the good for others. The idiosyncratic bent in Josh's story suggests that one

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[223] Trix, produced by General Mills since 1956, and Froot Loops, produced by Kellogg's since 1966, remain popular breakfast cereals among American children and many adults. Both cereals are brightly coloured.

can contemplate, in one's own personal context, ways of resolving these two competing tendencies of manhood, and become a respectable nonconformist.

<p style="text-align:center">6.2 Childhood and Gender Roles</p>

Hollywood has longed tried to unite two audiences through 'family' films that tell 'both adults and children very powerful and seductive stories about the relative meanings of childhood and adulthood' (Buckingham, 2000, p. 9). The 'figure of childhood has always been the focus of adult fears, desires, and fantasies' (ibid., p. 3) across a wide range of public discourse and media genres. Buckingham rightly points out that '"the child" is not a natural or universal category, which is simply determined by biology' (ibid., p. 6), but rather a social construction built upon the constantly shifting terrain of culture. *Big* is such a film in how it superimposes an adult autobiography over and through the body of a child who is then used as a foil to expose 'adult guilt and hypocrisy' (ibid., p. 9). The child Josh symbolises a renewed innocent period in the life of an adult—a time when one is allowed and afforded the freedom to play.

In telling of the adult Josh's desire to become a child again, *Big* is nostalgic, but not in the same way as *Back to the Future* or *Peggy Sue Got Married*. Josh is not trying to go back in time but back to his physical body as a child. He provides us with an external and physical representation of what we have lost as adults, and what many of us ultimately hope to regain. *Big* foreshadowed—and perhaps spurred on—popular notions of the 'inner-child' concept as articulated in Bradshaw's 1990 widely read book, *Homecoming: Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child*. For Buckingham (2000, p. 14), a fantasy film such as *Big* uses the character of a child to represent the 'idea' of childhood in order to help an adult grow.[224] In this respect, 12-year-old Josh is much like Marty McFly, a 'typical' American kid. He is obsessed with video games, likes to play baseball, is curious about (but not sure how

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[224] According to Buckingham (2000, p. 14): 'Children may be defined in terms of their lack of rationality, social understanding, or self-control; yet, by the same token, they can also be extolled (in however patronizing a way) for their lack of artifice, self-consciousness, and inhibition. There is, of course, a whole self-help industry, which is premised on the claim that adults need to get in touch with their "inner child"—claims that implicitly reinforce romantic notions of childhood as a site of truth and purity.'

to act around) girls, is embarrassed to be seen with his parents in public, and, more than anything else, he wants to be 'big.'

Josh's motivation to be big is a boy's common desire to better appeal to the opposite sex. When Josh approaches his classmate, Cynthia (Kimberlee M. Davis), at the carnival, but is too short to ride on the same roller coaster as her, it is clear that Josh wants to be physically taller ('bigger') so that he can be with Cynthia. In this scene, Josh displays traits that most adults, particularly males, can easily relate to and wax nostalgic about. What child has never wished that he or she could be 'big' (i.e. 'older') in order to enjoy the fruits of 'grown-up' life?[225] And when Cynthia introduces her boyfriend Darin (Mark Ballou) to Josh, she makes sure to point out that 'He drives,' further emphasising that Josh simply isn't yet 'man' enough to win her heart.

Register (2001, p. 315) also claims that when Josh wakes up as an adult, he is 'the literal embodiment of Bradshaw's therapeutic metaphor: a boy in a man's body.'[226] For example, Abele (2002, p. 448) cites Lehman, P. (1992) who views the mature male body as the 'root cause' of a 'crisis in American masculinity' because it repeatedly appears in popular culture as 'a barrier to the emotional growth and intimacy that is positioned as essential in contemporary society.' *Big* reflects this as one of several late 1980s films that put 'the mind and identity of a boy in the body and world of a man' (ibid.).[227] Josh is thus 'placed in the urban hero setting, taking the place of men who had learned to be successful in their careers by cutting themselves off personally, particularly separating themselves from women and children, focusing solely on their political goals' (ibid.). I agree with Abele's claim that the 'moral' of *Big* 'seems to be that the best way to be a man is to remain a boy at heart' (ibid.).

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[225] As Register (2001, p. 312) puts it, Josh's 'drama is provoked by the wrenching, perhaps even "scarring," experience of deprivation endemic to suburbia: he is denied admission to an amusement park ride because he is too small, and his affection for an older girl is unrequited.'

[226] See Bradshaw (1990) and Register (2001, pp. 309-311).

[227] These films include *Like Father Like Son* (Daniel, 1987), in which high school senior Chris Hammond (Kirk Cameron) and his father, Jack (Dudley Moore) accidentally trade bodies; *18 Again!* (Flaherty, 1988), in which 18-year-old David (Charlie Schlatter) switches souls with is 81-year-old grandfather (George Burns); and *Vice Versa* (Gilbert, 1988), in which Marshall Seymour (Judge Reinhold) trades bodies with his son, Charlie (Fred Savage).

Forced to get a job so that he can support himself until he can find the Zoltar machine and reverse his wish to be big, Josh is free to explore the adult world. And the MacMillan Toy Company provides an important training ground for Josh, full of quirky adults who offer him advice for surviving in the corporate world. Consider, for example, the scene in which Josh first meets his co-worker, Scott (Jon Lovitz), who tells him: 'You've gotta slow down. Pace yourself. Slowly! Slowly!' Despite Scott's apparent laziness, Boulton (2005, online) points out that '[a]mbition is an important theme' in *Big*, and the 'cut-throat competition Josh witnesses at MacMillan ironically serves to infantilize the adults by reducing them to ass-kissing corporate hacks,' such as Paul (John Heard).

Big cleverly uses Josh's young precocity to make him stand out from the 'adults' around him, which in turn brings him great success. As Register (2001, p. 314) asserts: 'The secret to his success (on the job as well as off, as the budding romance with his attractive fellow executive Susan shows) is that, in growing up, Josh has not grown old.' This is clearly reflected in the scene in which Josh unexpectedly meets his boss, Mr. MacMillan (Robert Loggia), in a toy store and impresses him with his 'child-like' knowledge of toys. For Josh, 'everything old is new again, and by accessing [his] "inner-child" [he] is on [his] way to the top' (Boulton, 2005, online). It is only because Josh is truly a child that MacMillan wrongly interprets him as a smart and savvy businessman with an exceptional knowledge of toys.

However, Boulton is also right in his assertion that 'job success is not enough for Josh to reach the garden of sexual maturity,' for he 'must also be initiated into the urban world of material excess' (ibid.).[228] Josh even installs a trampoline, a pinball machine, a basketball hoop, and a soda vending machine in his loft apartment, reflecting Holland's (2004, p. 187) belief that the media 'make[s] use of the childishness of children as a justification for adult behavior and patterns of consumption.' But the media 'also show children as trainees, displaying characteristics they share with adults, learning to take their place in an appropriately gendered adult world' (ibid.). The selfish, shallow materialism of Josh, while

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[228] Boulton (2005, online) cites the following examples: Josh 'goes on extravagant shopping sprees, sticks [his] head out of [a limousine], and romp[s] around New York City in an unabashed display of a kid opening presents on Christmas morning, all the while being forced to conform to strict gender expectations.'

seeming despicable in his MacMillan coworkers, appears the cute and innocent whim of a child. *Big* thus appears to claim that for the young at heart, commodities are just toys. But as Holland further suggests, for all the fun and games Josh enjoys in his newfound role as a successful businessman, one important distinction remains: gender.

Big reflects the inequality in gender roles as Josh is being trained to fulfill his heterosexual role as a male. Consider the scene, for example, in which Josh arrives at the company Christmas party wearing a gaudy, white tuxedo. His coworkers react with laughter, causing Josh to check and see if his zipper is down. Yet Josh's obvious social incompetence is rendered harmless when Mr. MacMillan tells him, 'Now that's what I call a tuxedo.' Here again, Josh plays the part of 'an "authentic" rising star, blissfully ignorant of his ridiculous appearance' (Boulton, 2005, online). But imagine if Susan showed up at the party inappropriately dressed. She would surely be socially chastised by her colleagues or, at the very least, be completely humiliated. However, because Josh is male, he is quickly forgiven by MacMillan who can only praise him for his ability to critique, improve, and even invent toys.

The comedic vehicle works well in *Big* because Josh, as an ironic rebel, can navigate comfortably in a less serious form than how rebels have typically been portrayed in American films. This is where Fairclough's (1992a) critical split of the interpersonal metafunction—in examining the social construction of Josh's identity and in tracking how he forms his relationships with other central characters— becomes pertinent in distilling the textual coherence of the film. Appearing as no particular threat to larger, more serious agendas in the corporate establishment, Josh can good-naturedly confront the conventions of mature respectability or responsible manhood. This ensures Josh's story as a good-natured rebel who can avoid any overly tragic consequences. As a perpetual adolescent, he has the discursive social and cultural license to flaunt these conventions of adult authority, without causing any apparent threat or harm to them.

Equally telling is that Josh loses his virginity after winning the affections of Susan, his corporate-ladder-climbing coworker. We think nothing of the fact that a boy who is barely a teenager is having sex with a woman more than twice his age. But how would we react if the roles were reversed? What if Susan were a 13-year-

old girl and Josh an adult man?[229] Chances are there would be outcry, for as Holland (2004, p. 180) declares, young girls 'in particular must not be seen to explore sexual knowledge on their own terms. Instead, they must perform childishness as if unaware of their sexual appeal.' In this respect, *Big* reinforces the idea that in a patriarchal heterosexual society, 'girls experience more restrictions on sexual expression than boys' (Boulton, 2005, online). But when viewed from a different perspective, 'the system also confines Josh to the roles of worker and comic relief, while quashing any aspirations he might have for self-objectification' (ibid.). Even though Josh's appearance becomes increasingly more 'adult' and professional after his sexual encounter with Susan, 'there is no indication that the evolving mature Josh is "dressing up" with an intense degree of self-awareness' (ibid.) we would expect from a woman in the same situation. Unlike a woman, Josh is not encouraged to 'dress to impress' to succeed in the corporate world.[230]

It is also ironic that the now sexually active Josh 'is rendered even more innocent in his adult body. At the very least, he is now a responsible, and faithful, boyfriend' (ibid.). However, Register (2001, p. 315) makes an important point in explaining that Josh 'has lost something in the bargain. His ideas for toys no longer have the zip they once did.' Instead, 'he is working late hours, neglecting his best buddy for dates with Susan…drinking coffee, and wearing suits' (ibid.). Buckingham (2000, pp. 26-28) supports this view by pointing out that the 'death of childhood' is often attributed to young people's increasing exposure—often through the media—to the 'secrets' of the adult world. Therefore, we might question what will happen to Josh if and when he is transformed back into a child. Will he 'forget all of the adult "secrets" [he's] learned so that he can successfully return to his original, "natural," and naïve state?' (Boulton, 2005, online). Or will he, as a child, use the adult knowledge he has gained to his advantage? At the very least, will he

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[229] According to Register (2001, p. 321), director Penny Marshall 'briefly toyed with the idea of casting a "girl" in the lead role. Then she remembered Josh's sexual initiation' and 'decided girls need not apply. "It doesn't work the other way," she explained. "I mean, it's a little more acceptable that a thirteen-year-old boy has an experience with a woman. The other way, it's impossible…Plus [referring to Josh reaching out to touch Susan's breast] what's she gonna touch?"' [See Darnton (1988)].

[230] This could be contested, however, in that a business suit is a powerful symbol of corporate team-play and legitimacy.

finally succeed in winning Cynthia Benson's heart, or has he completely outgrown this infatuation?

When Susan returns Josh to his childhood home, she tells him: 'Ten years? Who knows? Maybe you should hold onto my number.' Thus, Josh still seems somewhat tied to his adult life. But as he walks towards his home, Josh is magically transformed back into a child. And when he turns and waves at Susan with a sheepish smile, we see Susan's face, which now seems maternal. As the film closes, we find Josh and Billy (Jared Rushton) once again talking about baseball, and there is no indication that Josh has any regrets about his decision to abandon Susan for his childhood.[231] Yet again, Hollywood has 'won one for the Gipper': All is well and as it should be in Reagan's white, middle-class, suburban America. Just as in *Peggy Sue Got Married*, the nuclear family unit has been restored in Josh's return to suburban bliss. Curiously, however, Marshall chose not to show us Josh's reunion with his family—including his all but absent father in the film. We only hear his mother (Mercedes Reuhl) cry out: 'Oh, thank God you're home!'

This scene at the end of *Big* echoes Reagan's pro-family ideology during the 1980s, 'a period that saw the production of a clutch of comedies that use the figure of the child effectively to naturalise representations of phenomena such as family and parent-child relationships that were subjects of heated political controversy at the time' (King, 2002, p. 92). It is equally curious that Josh's father plays such a minor role in the film. Josh seems to be a typical American kid with a typical American family living in a typical American suburb, but the father's character is in no way visibly manifested in Josh, as was the case with Marty and George McFly in *Back to the Future*.

Big can also be analysed psychologically as a 'pre-Oedipal/Oedipal' fantasy text, although from a quite less significant 'subversive' perspective than we found in *Back to the Future*. Unlike Marty McFly, Josh has very little interaction with his mother: his phone call to her while at work, and his ultimate reunion in the closing scene. Instead, *Big*, owing largely to its comedic aspects, represents what King

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[231] According to the Internet Movie Database, the original ending of *Big* included a scene in which Josh is in school and a 'new girl' is brought into the classroom. Her similarity to Elizabeth Perkins and a reaction shot from Josh imply that this is Susan, who has also decided to become young again. However, the scene was cut after poor audience response in test screenings [online] Available at: http://us.imdb.com/title/tt0094737/ [Accessed 08 April 2008].

(2002, pp. 77-78) refers to as a 'magical realm outside the confining spaces of dominant cultural universe.' This is because the 'adult' Josh, who is still a child inside, remains in the 'arena of disruption, play and fluidity' (ibid.) that are characteristic of children who naturally exhibit—and are generally allowed to exhibit—childish behaviour. Again, it is Josh's 'childishness' that allows him to succeed in the adult business world as well as win the affections of Susan.

By being granted his wish to be 'big,' Josh presents us with 'the spectacle of the childlike adult' who is 'granted the freedom, resources and license to live a life of play' (ibid., p. 85), even at work. But as Josh's life becomes increasingly complicated by adult responsibilities, he chooses to return to his proper place as a child, even at the expense of his relationship with Susan. Accordingly, *Big* can be read from a socio-cultural perspective as an attempt to negotiate 'the rival demands of the pre-Oedipal and the Oedipal, the comic pleasures and freedoms of the former and the necessary social responsibilities of the latter' (ibid., p. 86). The film thus reinforces what King refers to as 'social conformity and integration, the Oedipal half of the equation' (ibid.). Josh really had no choice but to abandon his adult life because it was false. Furthermore, as a 13-year-old boy, continuing his relationship with the adult Susan would be considered 'improper' by American social standards, and indeed illegal for Susan. Thus, Josh's transformation back to his rightful place as a child provides a 'reaffirmation of [American] culture's belief in social conformity' (Seidman, 1979, p. 78), and a further, if not necessarily complete, endorsement of Reagan's idyllic vision of America.

However, there is an inherent instability that weakens such an endorsement. The experience of Josh's transformation suggests that, as much as previous generations, a particular sense of moral idealism is intact, but there also is the popular cynicism and disaffection about the government's capacity to achieve those ideals. Obviously, this was shadowed strongly by Reagan's position that simultaneously encouraged disrespect for a government which is alienated from the lives of its people, and respect for that same government for the same reason. Therefore, the analytical perspective in *Big* transcends the ideological barrier and goes deeper to a story of reconciling disaffection, of idealistic expectations going unfulfilled and, perhaps, being unfulfillable, which resounds convincingly in a

younger generation that likely never even developed illusions about those socio-political institutions in the first place.

Big is surely a film that celebrates the realm of playful childishness, and by doing so, it allows Josh to be 'celebrated as one capable of seeing or breaking through what is characterised as a veneer of social conventions based on dishonesty and hypocrisy' (King, 2002, p. 87). This can clearly be seen in Susan's gradual transformation from a ladder-climbing socialite—who is willing to sleep her way to the top—to someone who now is capable of falling for and, more importantly, appreciating Josh's boyish charm and honesty. Josh's childish innocence also reveals the jaded, cynical character of Paul, a yuppie[232] cast in the classic mode of avid social climber not particularly competent at the game of the survival of the fittest.[233]

Curiously, *Big* can also be viewed as an anti-Reagan text because Josh's 'pre-Oedipal…childlike behavior' serves as a way of 'questioning or attacking particular social structures or institutions' (ibid.)—in this case, greed and capitalism. Josh's childishness also reminds us of the strong sense of distance when it comes to the young generation's consciousness about the government and its attendant institutions. At age 12, Josh is a child of the 1970s, where the 1950s and the 1960s will forever, at best, be faded historical memories. Reagan, born in 1911 and the oldest man ever elected to the office of U.S. president, would hardly seem to carry the vigor and appeal of fresh ideas with any lasting conviction to a younger generation. In some respects, Josh represents a lost generation desperate to achieve ideals for a society where social equality and economic justice are supposed to be political leitmotifs, but who does not possess any real experience to carry the effort forward. The film, and in particular the ending, reflects, in part, the ambivalence about these iconic representations of manhood and masculinity.

Within this narrow combined paths, as suggested by Fairclough's (2003) interdiscursivity of texts and manifestations of an intertextual chain, we can see both the restoration of family order as well as the feelings, hesitations, and stigmas

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[232] The term 'yuppie' (short for 'young urban professional' or 'young upwardly-mobile professional') was coined in the 1980s to describe financially secure, upper-middle class young people in their 20s and 30s who were looking to advance both socially and economically in Reagan's 'greed is good' version of America.

[233] See Register (2001, p. 314), who claims that *Big* 'is *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, but without the witches. Josh's boyish innocence and zest for life charm all but the most crippled by the artificial concerns of adulthood.'

attached to the respectability of ordered, stable manhood. The unseen father—acknowledged in passing as being a part of Josh's nuclear family—is a significant aspect in its omission from the film. The father figures of middle-class suburbia seemed at the time, and likely even now, dull, indistinguishable, undramatic, and most particularly, unadventurous. Meanwhile, Josh signifies the sliver of an opportunity for an autonomous identity in a world where most men—and undoubtedly his father—elect to participate in a formalised corporate economy as servants to the unrelenting dictates and needs of bosses and customers. The potential subversive effect is there, although not as developed or as deeply articulated as we saw in *Back to the Future*. These subtle manifestations are worth exploring a bit further.

As we have seen, part of Reagan's right-wing ideology during the 1980s was restoring the American family led by the patriarchal father, and 'many films focused on fathers and sons and the further marginalization of the female' (Kinder, 1989, p. 4), such as *Back to the Future*. *Big*, on the other hand, attempts to 'blur the boundary between father and son,' and show us 'how one can profit both emotionally and economically from such an endeavor' (ibid., p. 6).[234] And while there is an Oedipal transgression in Josh's sexual relationship with the mother figure Susan, Kinder accurately explains that in *Big*, the 'relationship with the career woman and man-child combines eroticism and maternal nurturing in a positive, loving way' (ibid.). Furthermore, Josh does not actually replace his father, he merely wears his borrowed clothes, and the 'site of oedipal transgression is displaced from the family to business' (ibid.) when Josh gets hired at the MacMillan Toy Company. Despite suddenly becoming an 'adult,' Josh never gives up being the son. By retaining his childlike innocence, he is able to achieve both sexual and economic power without harming his father. However, Josh's innocence also permits him to be untamed, exciting, virile, and adventurous. Unlike fully-grown action heroes, Josh is presented as a benign figure, youthful and dynamic, yet indispensable to the general

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[234] See Register (2001, p. 386): 'This message also was related to the backlash against feminism' suggesting 'that men, in order to find themselves and become heroes in the eyes of their sons, must return to an all-male, prefeminist Never Land. For a parallel and contemporaneous prescription for male revitalization, see Robert Bly…1990…and Modleski...1991.'

functioning of the day-to-day social order. The balance is struck precariously on the virtue of the child.

Politically, *Big* arguably serves less as an ideological commentary than as an intricate, interlaced metaphor of disengagement—where the essential seeds of idealism to be an activist or advocate, to effect change in institutions and politics, are missing from those, who like Josh, are in the post-baby-boomers generation. *Big* celebrates the child. Yet, Josh does not serve as a substitute father like Marty in *Back to the Future*. Instead, the film offers 'an alternative to patriarchal values…one which is available to both genders' (ibid.). It claims that women as well as men can become the beneficiaries of greed, profit, and even corruption.

The 1980s saw a sleuth of films in which women found positions of power in corporate America, including Susan in *Big*.[235] During the 1980s, many female characters played 'positive businesswomen [who] outnumbered businessmen by a ratio of more than two to one' (Rothman, S., Powers, S. and Rothman, D., 1993, p. 71). In *Big*, Susan is positioned solidly as a sympathetic character. Consider the scene in which she nurses Josh's wounds after he was roughed up in a game with Paul. When Josh asks her, 'How come you're so nice?' she tells Josh: 'You don't know me that well.' Before meeting Josh, Susan made it in the corporate world by using sex in order to gain promotions, and we find her in yet another unhealthy relationship with her coworker, Paul. The contradictory elements in Susan's character serve to foreshadow the film's coherent, cohesive epiphanies.

When Susan realises that she is falling in love with Josh, whom Paul is extremely jealous of, both professionally and personally, she decides to break up with him, and he accuses her of sleeping with Josh—the newly promoted Vice President in Charge of Product Development—in order to further her career: 'Oh, come on, Susan! He's just another link in the chain!' Susan's act is nonconformist, yet hardly confirming that her role amounts to the hopeful, full-blown, progressive representation of the independent corporate woman. According to Kinder (1989, p. 6), *Big* 'ultimately conveys the regressive message of "postfeminism"' in that 'women should get back in touch with play and become less focused on career.' Susan does just that in her relationship with Josh, allowing herself to be more

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[235] She joins other female characters such as Molly (Kristie Alley), a CPA pursuing a career while trying to care for an infant in *Look Who's Talking* (Heckerling, 1989).

vulnerable and open to her feelings and desires, telling Josh: 'With all the other men, there was so much to hide.' In short, Josh enables Susan to access her 'inner-child,' as clearly evidenced in the trampoline scene in Josh's apartment.

Susan's role in *Big* reflects the inconsistency of female images during the 1980s. She is a smart and savvy businesswoman, but she also cannot be happy unless she has the right man by her side. Susan's personality is never nearly as strong as Josh's point of reference. Inevitably, it is still the man who brings the fresh, potentially profitable, ideas to the corporate table. The youthful Josh is still capable of articulating the dominant patriarchal discourse. In this respect, *Big* is pro-Reagan because it suggests, drawing on the conservative (traditional) social rhetoric, that a woman's place is in the home where she can fulfill her 'natural' role as a homemaker and caregiver.

Consider some of the press articles of the late 1980s claiming that a return to home and motherhood was the option that most women were taking. For example, Connie Koenenn's (1988, online) article, 'A Return to Tradition?' Ads That Call Women Happiest at Home Spark Wave of Protest,' reported on a major promotional campaign by *Good Housekeeping* magazine in which New York advertising executive Malcolm MacDougall claimed: 'The contemporary woman…wants just what her mother wanted: a home, husband, and children.' He added: 'She has realized…that being a wife and mother can be fun—I don't need anything else' (ibid.). However, this ad campaign caused outrage among many feminists, such as Betty Friedan, whom Koenenn quoted as saying: 'This is what I have been warning about…This is the new "feminine mystique," defining women once again in terms of their husband, family and home' (ibid.). Indeed, not only were prominent women pursuing active careers in the 1980s,[236] the truth is that greater numbers of women were entering the workforce, albeit at lower pay than their male counterparts.

However, it would be left to other films in the post-Reagan era to represent metaphorically the displacement of pre-ordered values in the workplace as well as the public sociopolitical arena. In the 1990s, issues of political correctness, the temptations of global business mergers, and stories of individuals taking on

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[236] For example, Elizabeth Dole, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, and Sandra Day O'Connor.

exploitive elements of corporate capitalism echoed throughout several films.[237] The fundamental dilemma in many of these films focused on the individual protagonist's struggle to follow the norms of the corporate office and boardroom. And they indicate that the potential for meaningful social reform, therefore, is found within the individual hero's set of ethical beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours—not the corporate institutions. *Big*'s distinction just happens to appear in the form of a clever comedy with an adorable protagonist as the ideal candidate for criticising Reaganism, and who has the same affable persona that the 'Great Communicator' himself had perfected.

In a sense, *Big* belongs to what Steve Neale (1992, p. 298) calls 'the "new romance"' genre—a genre that predominantly features an 'ideological tendency' that attempts to neutralise 'any "threat" of female independence,'[238] thereby 'conscripting women into traditional roles in the end' (Mellencamp, 1995, p. 83). Neale (1992, p. 298) sees *Big* as characteristic of the 'new romance' in several ways. For example, Josh's 'eccentricity, his sense of fun, and the general "freshness" of his outlook and perceptions help cure the heroine Susan…of her neurosis, her conformist tendencies, and her "nervousness" in matters of the heart' (ibid.). In choosing to leave the adult world—and thus, his adult relationship with Susan—and return to his childhood, Josh's 'eccentricity and sense of fun are…preserved, but only—and precisely—at the expense of the romantic relationship' (ibid.). It is ironic, however, that 'the fantasy that underlies the relationship' (ibid., p. 299) between Josh and Susan is also preserved by ending their 'adult' relationship.

6.3 The 'Arrested Development' of the American Dream

Big can be viewed as an ideological text in that 'Josh's journey from innocent pre-pubescent boy to innocent, successful adult represents a fantasy that one can grow up and have it all yet remain untouched by adult concerns like ethics or economic planning' (Overpeck, 2007, p. 193). In this sense, it reflects Reagan's 'American Dream with arrested development as the key to economic prosperity' (ibid.). Like we

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[237] These include *Disclosure* (Levinson, 1994), *Jerry Maguire* (Crowe, 1996), *In the Company of Men* (LaBute, 1997), and *The Insider* (Mann, 1999).
[238] See Mellencamp (1995, pp. 83-84), who questions this notion: '…what does women's freedom "threaten?"'

witnessed in *Pleasantville*, *Big* offers us a rosy picture of a cozy life in the suburbs. Like Bud and Mary Sue, Josh and Billy reflect the wholesomeness of *Leave it to Beaver* American youth. However, when the 'adult' Josh is forced to go to New York City in search of the Zoltar machine, we are thrust back into contemporary 'reality.' New York is presented as a menacing concrete jungle in which Josh is immediately confronted by a prostitute offering her services, and an apparently mentally ill homeless man muttering violent threats to an unknown and unseen woman. Josh has left the innocence of his childhood and now must deal head on with an adult world he seems ill-prepared to survive.

But Josh does survive because his childhood innocence enables him to miraculously succeed at the MacMillan Toy Company and win the heart of Susan. For Overpeck: 'The unaffected insight that Josh brings to the toy business is thus linked to the past: he shares a spiritual bond with an older generation [represented by Mr. MacMillan] that, though jaded, recognizes truth and honesty when it sees it' (ibid., p. 195). Indeed, it is 'Josh's promotion…[that] initiates the film's critique of 1980s capitalism' (ibid.), and, in this respect, *Big* serves as an 'anti-Reagan' text.

Unlike his office nemesis Paul, who sees everything in black-and-white market reports, Josh speaks with the innocence and honesty of a child, which is mistakenly interpreted as a unique and instinctive awareness of the toy business by MacMillan and his yes-men. Josh is the antidote to Paul, the iconic representation of a corporate man aware and fearful of every socially consequential domain of his life in and out of work. Josh has been freed by the intense, persistent pressures to live up to these values. However, because of his youthfulness and innocence, he is hampered by his lack of experience and capacity for seeing paths of actions, advocacy, and engagement that lead to real progressive change and reform. *Big*'s attachment to the frame of Reaganism is indeed fragile. There is hope that like Josh, a generation of young people, still fresh in post-adolescent rebellion, will step up to challenge the status quo.

Yet despite its anti-Reagan elements, *Big* can also be viewed as a pro-capitalism text, reflecting the 'greed is good' mentality of the 1980s, as evidenced in *Peggy Sue Got Married*. Jordan (2003, p. 128), for example, sees *Big* as one of several 'class-sensitive yuppie' films that were popular in the 1980s.[239] In addition,

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[239] A good example being *Bright Lights, Big City* (Bridges, 1988).

Big can be considered a 'political commodity' as it was 'marketed to those most likely to spend money during Reagan's presidency' (Carlson, G., 2004, online). During the 1980s, movies 'appealed to a desire for conspicuous consumption' (ibid.), as witnessed in the plethora of product placement in *Back to the Future* as well as several other films produced in the 1980s.[240] Indeed, there was nothing subtle about the product placement in *Big*, with a Pepsi soda vending machine prominently displayed in Josh's apartment living room. Just as we saw in *Peggy Sue Got Married*, consumption is the outlet by which men besieged in their manhood can compensate for whatever real—or imagined—perceptions they lack in their own masculinity. Perhaps every man looks for the outlet by which he can abandon—even just temporarily—the corporate, commercialised world for an idealised, nostalgic breath of fresh air where the authentic, unproblematic nature of youth is always evident.

However, my analytical concern also encompasses the intricate roles semiosis plays in the often radically shifting elements of social life and why, as Fairclough (2001) concluded, these intra-semiotic enactments reflect, incorporate, and mix different genres. Josh's romantic and sexual relationship with Susan marks his departure from 'the playful vigor and insight that marked his youth, and [he] begins to become an adult in mind as well as body' (Overpeck, 2007, p. 195). But through the efforts of Billy, whose protests remind Josh of the importance of friendship, Josh spends a day walking around his old neighbourhood where he sees children playing and school pictures being taken. Josh realises that the adult world is too much for him to handle, no matter how successful he has become in business and love. Faced with the challenge to present a new toy line at MacMillan, he confides in Susan, who mistakenly thinks he is married, and then assumes that he is just another man who is afraid of commitment. Finally, succumbing to the pressure of adult life, Josh runs out of the meeting, finds the Zoltar machine, and returns to his youth, reflecting what Overpeck (2007, p. 196) sees as 'the paradox of the Reagan years: the ill fit between traditional social values and corporate culture.'

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[240] For a brief but interesting synopsis of the history of product placement in Hollywood films, see Good (2007, online). See also Newall, Salmon and Chang (2006, online)—who claim that product placement in movies began as early as the 1820s but 'became a star' with the 1982 release of *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (Spielberg, 1982)—for a more in-depth analysis.

That 'paradox,' however, had become widely apparent long before the 1980s. The fantasy of the traditional American Dream already had mutated into a far more pervasive, fragmented mystique of success. Consumer status and accumulated wealth still mattered, but the mystique was also fed by the thrill of victory and the risks of defeat in corporate boardroom and consumer market battles, often at the expense of ethics or genuine desire for self-fulfillment. Josh escapes just in time before the mystique becomes a self-defeating image that would forever close off any alternative measurement of his self-esteem.

We could assume that Josh could survive and continue to succeed as an adult in corporate America. But in order to do so, he would have to sacrifice his innocence—the very thing that brought him success. Susan is forced to make a choice as well, and she rejects Josh's suggestion that she make a wish to be young again on the Zoltar machine and return with him: 'I've been there before. It's hard enough the first time.' Here, the film seems to be telling us that 'innocence…is proper only to childhood: to recapture it is presented as regression' (ibid.). Susan appears to be suggesting metaphorically that Reagan was wrong: turning back the clock and 'changing' history is unwise. It is better for one to lose one's innocence over time, naturally. Thus, *Big*, like *Back to the Future*, reflects Reagan's emphasis on retrieving and resurrecting old national tropes about an old-fashioned America,[241] but it also is ironic that unlike *Back to the Future*, *Big* seems to both promise and refute this notion.

Big also reminds us that younger generations, despite Reaganism, are the products of a progressively enlightened, open-minded culture. For example, while there was the 1980s sitcom *Family Ties* featuring Alex Keaton as a fervent young republican, there was also its contemporary, *The Cosby Show*'s Heathcliff Huxtable (Bill Cosby), a successful African-American doctor, who emerged as a national icon of the wise, highly respected father. Basketball's Michael Jordan became the undisputed national sports hero. Young people were getting from their parents clear messages and cues about cultural and social values that placed an increased emphasis upon equality and tolerance. Josh's story in *Big* reminds us that those messages often do not match up to reality, but it is possible that those messages have influenced some individuals with a more powerful impact than others.

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[241] See Berman (1998).

With its release during the Christmas season of 1988, *Big* appeared 'just as the Reagan boom began to show signs of going bust and when conversion, consequently, began to seem a potentially appealing option' (Herron, 1993, p. 11). In a matter of weeks, Reagan's successor, George H. W. Bush, would be taking the oath as the nation's new president. Despite Reagan's substantial personal popularity, the precepts of Reaganism stood to be challenged and altered significantly in the new presidential administration—a result of a less personally popular president and of a more aggressive, contentious opposition.

A significant (and famous) scene in the film is when Josh meets his boss, Mr. MacMillan, in a toy store where they play a duet together on a huge, floor-sized piano. MacMillan is at first reluctant, but is soon having the time of his life, as are the shoppers who watch in delight. Everyone gets caught up in 'the playful romance of childhood regained. No more vicarious thrills for burned out parents; this is the real thing—a triumph over their generational isolation from play, childhood, and their own kids' (ibid., p. 12). The fact that this takes place in the Fifth Avenue F.A.O. Schwarz toy store in New York is quite significant historically: it was once the showroom of the General Motors Corporation, a venerable symbol of American capitalism. For Herron, this scene represents 'not just the displacement of an industrial infrastructure by a playful one based on information and service, but a conversion of historically constituted space by an economy that specifically attacks the putative authority of narrative production' (ibid.). Positioned slyly like a mischievous child with superficially admirable intentions, the scene seems to 'attack' the act of 'growing up.'

Yes, Josh does eventually decide to return to his childhood, but not before he teaches the adults around him an important message: the way to success and happiness in life, business, and love, is to surrender to one's 'inner child.' Like the protagonists in the other films chosen for this study, Josh is most definitely a de-centered, postmodern character and *Big* is, once again, a postmodern 'nostalgic' film. But Josh's longing to return to the 'past' (i.e. his childhood) is not nostalgic in the same way as *Pleasantville* or *Peggy Sue Got Married*. In contrast to those films, *Big* longs for a past that doesn't exist at all because no time travel has occurred. Josh became a 'colonized adult,' a 'present-tense hybrid, an historical conversion in progress, which is where the film concludes…where *then* and *now* converge' (ibid.).

With Reagan, too, amid all of the depoliticising and simplifying of his presidency, there is nothing today that seems too much in the rush to enshrine the memory of the man. However, as historians begin to write the second and third drafts of Reagan's history, the judgments which emerge in the longer passage of time will undoubtedly be far more refined, textured and nuanced than the tributes which have continued to be made during the 2011 centenary of Reagan's birth. Likewise, *Big* does not try to recover the past. Instead, it attempts to 'get over' it—it is 'about conversion, not memory' (Herron, p. 12).

6.4 Conclusion

Big is, in many respects, both an 'anti'- and 'pro'- Reagan text. At times, it seems to attack the 'greed-is-good' mentality of Reagan's presidency. Of course, Reagan was not proposing that anyone be given a 'free ride.' He believed that success must be earned through education and hard work (ignoring the fact, of course, that the wealthy class often hands down their wealth to their offspring). As Jordan (2003, p. 123) states: 'The yuppies lifestyle of working hard, working out, and spending lavishly becomes in the 1980s a declaration that the middle class has lost none of its moral resolve in the wake of countercultural confusion.' In this sense, *Big* offers a somewhat cynical manipulation of the system because, after all, Josh deceives the MacMillan Toy Company in order to get hired, though he does flourish (and it is important to note that because of Josh, the company does as well).[242] So it is ironic that while the film seems to attack Reaganism, it also covertly supports it with the idea that 'the end justifies the means.' It is okay that Josh lied in order to get a job at MacMillan. He did so simply to ensure his survival, just as Reagan 'bent' the rules in order for America to survive and recover from the Carter years.

Josh represents just one way of recreating the dramatic role of manhood. In terms of re-imagining or re-inventing these roles, men can leverage the ideological possibilities, finding diverse, compelling ways to make the precepts and notions of Reaganism and contemporary corporate and social norms accessible and flexible

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[242] See Register (2001, p. 314) who states: '[M]ost of *Big*'s direction is derived from the logic of Kiley's [1983, pp. 22-37] revised Peter Pantheism and Bradshaw's [1990] wonder childishness. A healthy, mature man (and, by extension, a profitable business) retains some of the playful boy within him.'

according to their own life stories and desires. *Big*, therefore, emerges as a culturally rich but open-ended narrative framework. The childhood heroics of Josh can be contemplated and envisioned in their own individual renditions.

Still, several critics attacked *Big*, accusing the film of 'cynically cozying up to "acquisition-guilty yuppies" and playing to the late-1980s of corporate excess' (Register, 2001, p. 315).[243] However, this kind of criticism is shortsighted because the film also participates 'in a century-long investigation of the relation of toys to manhood' (ibid.), and from a gender-standpoint, it 'also retains the enduring suspicion that women will swipe the best thing that men have going for themselves—the fun-loving boy inside' (ibid.). Indeed, if viewed from Register's perspective, '*Big*'s story was neither peculiar to postwar America nor limited to the antifeminist reaction of the Reagan…years. Nor did it exhaust the theme' (ibid.).[244] Reagan's version of the American Dream was, in a sense, a 'Never Land' for most Americans—particularly women, minorities, and AIDS victims. Still, Americans wanted so much to believe Reagan's version of the 'truth,' that they were willing to accept that it was really all an illusion. If Americans followed Reagan's example, he would 'teach them to fly like him' (ibid., p. 321).

Quite effectively, *Big* shows us just how unstable and fleeting the dream really is, and just how quickly disappointment, disillusionment, and alienation reveal the most destructive effects of becoming fully self-obsessed with the imagined phantoms of that dream. Despite Reagan's message recalling a nostalgic sense of American leadership and mythic homespun innocence that has been invoked regularly in each presidential election cycle for the last three decades, a clear truce of reconciliation in the post-Vietnam culture wars has yet to emerge. The profound questions of meaning and historical memory target the process by which individuals reconcile their own search for an inner 'truth' with their experiences of living through a major event. The value and significance of that historical memory reside

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[243] See Sachs (1988, online).

[244] Register (2001, p. 321) further elaborates: 'Even if the dilemmas of Never Land cannot be resolved, the eternal boy remains useful in justifying the bounty and in explaining away the deficits that contemporary middle-class men experience in their everyday lives. If men will follow the boy's example, he will teach them to fly like him. After all, for most of the twentieth century, American culture provided stages on which Peter Pan was free to soar and pulleys and guy wires to make sure he could get off the ground, even if the strings were there for all to see.'

not in how the event actually transpired, but somewhere in that space of consciousness between the actual experience and the process of remembrance itself.

In 1980, where cynicism, disenchantment and disengagement dominated the American political and media discourse, most Americans voted with their wallets and pocketbooks in mind. Reagan's brand of conservatism fortified the nation's already near-religious worship of American self-initiative that historically had generated unrealistic expectations for disenfranchised groups struggling to escape the bonds of racism, poverty, and ethnic and social discrimination. While one can publicly disavow the need for political engagement to solve basic problems, politics, nonetheless, is still needed to bring about effective public solutions to ensure equal economic opportunity, sustainable environments, preservation of natural resources, and access to affordable education and health care. In 2008, when he accepted his party's nomination for the presidency, Barack Obama's unapologetic message of liberalism was built on the theme of 'know hope.'[245] In 2011 as in 1988, the film's message remains relevant. *Big* suggests that a lost generation of youth—illusionless and disengaged from ideology—should and can find new ways of cultivating individually desired identities that spring from the roots of American values such as fairness, equality, and freedom.

We will now turn to Chapter 7 and the analysis of *The Family Man*, another fantasy film that promotes the values of family and the relative stability of life in American suburbia over greed and capitalism, but this time from a post-Reagan, post-Clinton, George Bush perspective.

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[245] Sullivan (2009, online) described Obama's acceptance speech for the presidential nomination as masterfully substantive: 'His ability to portray that liberalism as a patriotic, unifying, ennobling tradition makes him the most lethal and remarkable Democratic figure since John F. Kennedy.'

Chapter 7:
Case Study #5 of *The Family Man*

7.1 Introduction

The most popular Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s were archetypes of family bliss: children respected their parents, fathers were benevolent, and mothers were loving and nurturing.[246] Sex was a 'serious' matter and, thus, portrayed in a discreet and 'proper' manner, religious faith was affirmed, and values that fostered social cohesion were promoted. And, like the ending of *The Wizard of Oz*, films reassured us: 'There [really] is no place like home' and 'families were portrayed as the warm center of the universe' (Feder, 2007, online). In contrast, contemporary movies appear to send the message that 'at best, families are irrelevant, and, at worst, oppressive, suffocating and an obstacle to self-fulfillment and happiness' (ibid.), as can easily be witnessed in Marty McFly's inept family before he succeeds in 'transforming' them into objects of success in *Back to the Future*, or the broken family unit portrayed in *Pleasantville*.

Brett Ratner's 2000 film, *The Family Man*, on the other hand, seems to restore a positive light on the traditional family structure. An unabashedly energised contemporary variation of the Christmas film classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *The Family Man* situates the narrative about the rehabilitated capitalist in a 'magical realism' in which, as Todorov (1975) would suggest, we the viewers—like the film's chief main character—hesitate momentarily in disbelief before readily seeing the possible parallels with someone who is no different from ourselves, and who must occasionally confront seemingly unexplainable circumstances or events. However, while the film focuses almost exclusively upon the protagonist's interpersonal traits away from the Wall Street institutional setting, the broader and more troubling fantastical dimension suggests racism no longer exists. A Todorov perspective alone

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[246] See Carlson, A. C. (2001, online) who points out that 'Hollywood, which spewed out hundreds of raunchy, sex-obsessed films in the late 1920's and early 1930's, met its match in the new Catholic and Protestant Film Boards organized in the late 1930's. These two agencies, which carried only moral authority, exercised an astonishing influence over film and television for thirty years. Gratuitous sex and blatant violence disappeared for a whole generation. Forced by popular pressure to concentrate on scripts with uplifting themes, Hollywood entered its Golden Age.'

is insufficient to tackle this analysis, so Jackson's (1981) notion of profoundly unconscious ideology and Cortázar and Safir's (1976) 'interstitial' space of fantasy which illuminates non-universal cultural norms and stereotypes serve to situate the film's critique concerning patronising, unrealistic portrayals of black characters.

The film begins with Nicolas Cage as Jack Campbell, a powerful and successful Wall Street executive who makes no apologies for being a ruthless capitalist, and who finds nothing wrong with doing whatever it takes to make money, even if it means forcing his employees to work late on Christmas Eve. He appears to be a self-centered and self-satisfied man who, for all intents and purposes, has 'everything' he needs: a New York penthouse apartment, an expensive Ferrari, and beautiful women—albeit for sex only—at his beck and call. Jack's financial success comes from his ability to negotiate multi-million-dollar mergers, a talent that his boss, Peter (Josef Sommer), recognises by calling Jack 'a credit to capitalism.' So perfect is Jack's life that he answers the mysterious angel Cash's (Don Cheadle) question—'What do you need, Jack?'—with 'I got everything I need.' So incensed by Jack's confidence and greed, Cash decides to give Jack a 'glimpse' of the life he could have had had he not left his college girlfriend Kate (Téa Leoni) 20 years ago to pursue a career as a stockbroker in London.

The Family Man opens as a classic example of Todorov's fantastic narrative. Jack falls asleep in his Manhattan penthouse and awakens on Christmas morning in bed with—and married to—Kate, with two small children, living in their middle-class suburban home in New Jersey, complete with two beds and an ordinary retail job selling tires in his father-in-law Big Ed's (Harve Presnell) store. The state of New Jersey has long been the butt of many jokes made by people who live in New York. This is partly because it is considered (by many New Yorkers) as a 'low class' area (e.g., rent is much cheaper, people tend to work 'blue collar' jobs and thus lack the 'sophisticated' taste of savvy New Yorkers).[247] Thus for Jack, finding himself living in New Jersey instead of New York City is an added insult to his predicament.

Much like Josh in *Big*, Jack's 'time travel' does not involve going back or forward in time, but rather to an alternate reality. At first, Jack's glimpse seems like

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[247] Common New Jersey stereotypes include 'bad drivers, gold chains and track suits, suburban hellscapes, gum popping, teased hair, Turnpike traffic, smokestacks, awful accents, dopey mobsters, white limos—basically everything unchic' (Haughey, 2004, online).

a nightmare, one that he desperately wants to escape. As Todorov (1975, p. 31) would note, this becomes Jack's essential choice: he either has fallen temporarily under an illusion or imagination in which the real-time conditions of the world are status-quo, or he has experienced an event which is now an 'integral part of reality,' but where the alternate dimension is never fully comprehensible.

However, in the neatly packaged true-to-form popular cinema, Jack learns what is important in life: love, family, and friends 'are far more important than material possessions, power and freedom' (Feder, 2007, online). At the end of the movie, when Jack reawakens in his Wall Street existence, he longs to have his family life back with Kate. Like George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*, and Scrooge (Alastair Sim) in *A Christmas Carol* (Hurst, 1951), Jack 'has discovered the real meaning of life' (Feder, 2007, online). By fumbling his way through family life, Jack realises that 'for all its messiness, family life really is more gratifying than single life' (Epstein, 2000, online). It is a potent riposte to those who might feel the sting of criticism from their economic and professional peers for falling short of their career aspirations or dreams of great wealth. Ratner drives this 'messiness' point home in a scene in which Jack attempts to change his baby son's diaper—a tried and true, as well as comedic, trope in Hollywood filmmaking. In fact, Hollywood has a long tradition of showing the ineptness of men in their seeming inability to change a baby's diaper which, from an ideological viewpoint, seems to reinforce stereotypes that childcare is 'women's work' and not suited to 'masculine men.'[248]

7.2 The 'New' American Dream is Love

The 'messiness' of family life, however, represents a mere token, an inconsequential cost for Jack. For Kornbluh (2002, p. 157), *The Family Man* represents 'a certain mode of closure of this United States discourse of choice.' The film

> does not employ an alternate reality to enlighten a looming choice [such as *Pleasantville*]; it rather works to indict the egregious error of an acquiescence to a past choice. In instructing

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[248] Consider the example in *The Pacifier* (Shankman, 2005), in which Vin Diesel reacts in similar disgust as Jack to the dirty deed of diaper changing. Other examples can be found in films such as *Three Men and a Baby* (Nimoy, 1987) and *Daddy Day Care* (Carr, S., 2003).

the hero to recuperate a choice-free state, the film depicts the drive to internalize the alternate reality, to add to its positive features to extant reality (ibid.).

In doing so, the film becomes a postmodern text in the way that it 'evacuates choice,' so to speak, and sends Jack on a mission to fulfill what is supposedly lacking in his life: love. However, at first glance, love seems to be a poor solution to Jack's postmodern, social alienation, particularly because his 'previous' life—full of money, power, and sex—does not seem bad at all.

The Family Man is not a typical story of a 'bad' guy who learns to be a 'nice' guy. As Fairclough (1995a, p. 78) would indicate, Ratner's innovative story, in some respects, goes against conventional narrative and audience expectations when Jack and Cash cross boundaries and find themselves de-centered in overlapping competitive arenas of differing ideologies. We can easily speculate that Jack, as 'a credit to capitalism,' really doesn't *need* love at all to be happy, at least in a materialistic sense. Following Žižek's formulation (1989, pp. 58-59), the film's fantasy frame—just as in *Big*—permits us to cross the boundaries of hesitation and disbelief, and find our own open-ended, internally consistent, meaningful conclusions and narratives.

Thus, the film seems to reveal, among other intertextual layers, a deeper ideological, racially-pulsed hegemonic struggle: 'In directly translating "alienation" into "lack of love," the film erects an alternate meaning of alienation' (Kornbluh, 2002, p. 160). Jack's 'glimpse' of what his life would be like if he had stayed with Kate conveys the message that capitalistic success—sewn with great political fervor in the Reagan years, and unashamedly nourished during the Clinton years with widespread prosperity (except for those historically disenfranchised, disempowered, and dislocated)—is not enough for true happiness. One needs *true* love in order to escape the alienation of our postmodern society.

Following Fairclough (1989, p. 30), we need to dig deeper into the film's textual dimensions for the hegemonic struggles, ultimately more relevant than the ideological struggles, in visualising the possible imaginary worlds of choice that signal hegemonic change. The aforementioned period of prosperity was countered with a growing sense of social alienation as well as continuing racial tension and

segregation.[249] In fact, Fuller, J. (2006, pp. 167-169) claims that '[i]n the 1990s, fears of racial fracture and desires for racial reconciliation converged' and '[t]he rediscovery of racism and a racial divide between blacks and whites threatened America's new sense of itself as a successfully integrated nation.' In *The Family Man*, as in similar stories of the rehabilitated capitalist, something was still missing. Several 'romantic dramadies' were produced in the 1990s in which 'characters of innumerable resources (i.e. good jobs, happy families, close friends, not to mention shelter, sustenance, and health) relentlessly strive for the one thing they lack: love' (Kornbluh, 2002, p. 162).[250] At one level, the alienation trope in the film can, therefore, be viewed as an attempt to wed romance with capitalism.

Instead of having to choose between his life as a successful Wall Street stock broker or suburban bliss in New Jersey, Jack realises that he can have both, so he tries to convince Kate to move to New York after he is hired at his 'old' firm and, reluctantly, she agrees. For Kornbluh, 'the film inadvertently makes clear' that 'love is fervently delimited as romantic even while expressly contextualized as social' (ibid.).[251] The film is telling us that true love—while seemingly hard to find, and perhaps almost impossible to find within a Western, capitalistic society—can be found if one picks the right imaginative and life-transforming choice of different pathways. Therefore, the film functions comfortably within the realm of Todorov's (1975, p. 26) 'magical realism' and within the realm of Fairclough's (2003, p. 124) 'projective, imaginaries, representing possible worlds' with its insistence that true

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[249] See Massey and Denton's (1993) discussion of the 'racially segregated character of the U.S.' and the fact that many Americans (particularly whites) 'spend little time interacting with people of different racial or ethnic groups' in Hughey (2009, pp. 543-577).

[250] Kornbluh (2002, p. 161) cites the following films as reflecting this notion that finding true love is 'precious and rare': *Bridget Jones Diary* (Maguire, 2001), *Never Been Kissed* (Gosnell, 1999), *The Wedding Singer* (Coraci, 1998), *The Wedding Planner* (Shankman, 2001), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (Hogan, 1997), *The Truth About Cats & Dogs* (Lehman, M., 1996), and *Sweet November* (O'Connor, 2001).

[251] Kornbluh (2002, p. 162) precedes this comment with: '*The Family Man* is the radical pinnacle of…romantic impossibility: Jack is the paradigmatic capitalist; his alternate reality disgusts him not for its emotive/humanitarian/mushy content but because it is terrifyingly middle-class; his lack is not a general lack of kindheartedness/affective capacity, but a lack of love; alienation is not a potentially critical distance from conditions of existence, but an existential lack of fulfillment…heteronormative monogamous romantic love is not just a pleasant addition to an otherwise resourceful life but the very condition of a meaningful life.'

love is the answer to all of our woes: it has the power to overcome our social malaise, our feelings of loss, and our feelings of disconnection. In this respect, *The Family Man* reflects the lesson taught by 'the Oedipus-industrial complex' (Kornbluh, 2002, p. 163), which is that 'the answer to *all* (italics mine) of our worldly problems is love' (ibid.).

However, as Fairclough (1989, p. 71) instructs, as a fantasy text, the film does not 'foreground ideologies,' but instead permits us to bring the 'ideologies to the interpretation.' For example, the 'love' *The Family Man* is promoting is private, not 'public-love-for-your-fellow-man' love. Therefore, for some, the film is saying that it is okay to ignore the homeless person sleeping on the park bench; it is okay to gorge ourselves on fast/junk food when there are starving children in Africa. Indeed, the ability to emotionally and morally 'disconnect' is absolutely essential in order to survive and function in our postmodern world. Kornbluh (2002, p. 163) points out that '[i]n the words of dominant culture, our economy is comprised of individuals who respect each other's individuality.' Indeed, Jack's success as mega-money-maker is portrayed in the film not as much through his ingenious, pressure-driven Wall Street savvy skills, but more emphatically through his personal charms and positive impressions.

It is also important to note that *The Family Man* uses 'financial imagery' to convey its message of love. Consider, for example, the scene in which Jack is considering cheating on his wife, Kate, with his sex-starved neighbor, Evelyn (Lisa Thornhill), and his best friend Arnie (Jeremy Piven) scolds him for even considering it.[252] What Arnie is really trying to tell Jack is to 'keep walking' past temptation and desire. In a sense, then, the film mirrors *Peggy Sue Got Married* in promoting monogamy, a fresh counterpoint of marital bliss to the then recent and hugely publicised Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal. The film suggests that true love is fragile, and so vulnerable to transgressions and invisible boundaries (or illusions) waiting to emerge, that it must remain a *private*, not a public affair.

Set within a capitalist context, love and romance as represented in *The Family Man* are personal and private. It is 'not humanitarian love' because, as Kornbluh (2002, pp. 155-171) asserts: 'the privatization of love gives rise to a

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[252] Arnie tells Jack: 'A little flirtation is harmless, but you're dealing with fire here! All right, man? The "Fidelity Bank & Trust" is a tough creditor. You make a deposit somewhere else, they close your account, forever!'

narcissistic demonstration of abundance.' In other words, 'I have so much love that I can even spare some on you' (ibid.). Thus, public acts of love and kindness 'supplement the satisfaction of the private other' (ibid.). For Jack, Kate serves as a catalyst for his realisation that in the end, he *can* have it all: the high-power, high-paying job on Wall Street, and the nuclear family (though we are left to wonder if Kate and Jack will choose the suburbs or the city to raise their family).

As the film closes on Jack and Kate's conversation over coffee—which, it should be noted, we are not privileged to hear—the following analysis by Kornbluh rings true:

> Love is not about completion, about soothing the alienation of an established order so that life can more pleasantly coincide with the [capitalistic] system, but rather about inspiration, about stimulating the imagination of a radically different order where there is neither scarcity nor shallowness of social connection (ibid., p. 170).

In this light, *The Family Man* affords us a fantastical moment to hesitate and cross the boundary of disbelief, and imagine an interpretation that confronts—or sanitises—the illusionary realities of the scandalous, albeit prosperous,[253] Clinton years in the White House. Like the rehabilitated capitalist, we can then imagine the possibility of a chastened president rehabilitated as a 'family man.'

7.3 Rewriting History

As a fantasy text, *The Family Man* manipulates narrative timespace to reexamine national identity. And as a post-Clinton, pre-9-11 text, the film 'can be interpreted as an expression of the difficulty of narrating national identity at a time of historical crisis' or, as in this case, 'transformation' (Martin-Jones, 2006, p. 1). The film is one

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[253] At the end of Clinton's eight-year presidency, record budget deficits became record surpluses, 22 million new jobs were created, and unemployment and core inflation were at their lowest levels in more than 30 years. Indeed, it was the longest period of economic expansion in America's history. See 'The Clinton Presidency: Historic Economic Growth.' [online] Available at: http://clinton5.nara.gov/WH/Accomplishments/eightyears-03.html [Accessed 14 October 2011).

of several American movies produced during the 1990s that, like the 1980s films already discussed, reflects a return to the past in an attempt to renegotiate 'historical transformations' by 'reasserting a singular, mythical timeline that stems from a fictional origin' (ibid., p. 137).[254] Like *Back to the Future* and *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *The Family Man* is another example of what Davies and Wells (2002, p. 3) claim is a 'deep theme of much American cinema…

> the simultaneous longing to acknowledge the profound effects of late industrial capitalism and technological innovation, yet also for a nostalgic desire to look back upon our past in the spirit of loss for supposedly better times. It was always thus. Whilst sustaining a model of progress, the United States has always been anxious about the values and achievements it may have left behind.

The film thus offers alternate versions of 'the same national present' (Martin-Jones, 2006, p. 137). Like three other films—*Wall Street* (1987), *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (DePalma, 1990), and *American Psycho* (Harron, 2000)—*The Family Man* exemplifies Hollywood's fascination with Wall Street and reveals the sustained values, tensions and struggles that career-motivated individuals face at varying stages of their lives. Furthermore, the film sustains Hollywood's portrayal of 'yuppies' despite the changing political circumstances of the Wall Street economy.

The film is a contemporary variation on Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* because it presents a male protagonist who is given the opportunity to make the 'right' choice and reclaim his indispensable role in his family and his community. But whereas *It's a Wonderful Life* tried to 'neutralise the historical trauma of civilian [male soldiers returning from World War II] reentry' (Silverman, 1992, p. 93) into the workplace and once again becoming the breadwinner, *The Family Man* offers a heroic white male's attempt to overcome more contemporary crises involving American 'family values, masculinity, post-Cold War economic recession and racial segregation' (Martin-Jones, 2006, p. 138). But in taking a cue from *It's a Wonderful Life*, Jack decides to renounce his shallow, materialistic, yuppie lifestyle and 'return to middle America and start a family,' which reflects making the right choice 'in

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[254] Martin-Jones (2006, p. 137) cites *Blast From the Past* (Wilson, 1999) and *Frequency* (Hoblit, 2000) as examples.

favour of the ideal vision of small-town America' (ibid.). The film also valorises 'the national over the transnational' because Jack's alternate futures are ultimately 'determined by globalisation' (ibid.). Consider, for example, the fact that the financially successful Jack went to London for his internship with Barclay's Bank, whereas 'the family-man version of Campbell never stayed in New York's neighbouring global city to become "corrupted" in this way' (ibid.). Instead, he returns to Kate in America and becomes, as the film's title plainly proclaims, a true 'family man.'

When Jack wakes up in bed and finds himself married to Kate with two small children, living the supposed 'good life' in suburban New Jersey, the film expects us to accept that this life is not only better, but more rewarding than the one he was living as a rich and powerful man in New York—despite the fact that now his only reward for working at a retail tire store is the satisfaction of supporting his family. And instead of $3,000 designer suits, he now wears the uniforms of suburbia, which, as Hicks (2003, p. 48) claims: 'from [his] bowling shirts to his standardized work attire,' Jack's clothes now 'underscore the conformity that now defines his existence.' However, not being able to wear expensive designer suits or carry his leather attaché—markers of his potential self-confidence and self-satisfaction— indicates to him that his alternate life connotes failure.

Regarding Jack's attempt to combine his real life with his alternate life with Kate, *The Family Man* 'suggests that Jack does embrace this new mode of collectivity into which Kate has indoctrinated him' (ibid., p. 49). And it is ironic that when Jack goes to meet the real Kate—who is a high-power lawyer preparing to move overseas for a new position—he realises that she 'has none of the domestic sentimentality of her counterpart in the life Jack has been visiting' (ibid.). Thus, Jack's attempts to convince Kate to stay—just as she had tried to convince him not to go to London at the beginning of the film—reflects Jack's new 'position of advocating a more feminized existence for both of them' (ibid.). In particular, Jack rhapsodises unashamedly about love: '…I've seen what we could be like together, and I choose us.'[255] Ideologically, then, *The Family Man* tries to reassure 'those who

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[255] Hicks (2003, p. 50) rightly points out that 'as Jack implores her to settle down in the suburbs, what is most evident is not what she stands to gain, but what she will lose. Importantly, the film fails to provide a predictably sentimental ending in which Kate falls into Jack's arms and agrees to join him in suburbia; instead, it concludes

never became successful entrepreneurs that their lives are still indispensible to the nation' (Martin-Jones, 2006, p. 139). Success, instead, comes from the struggles of white, middle-class Americans 'to maintain the old in the face of the new' (ibid.). Just as Josh in *Big* represents just one way of recreating the dramatic role of manhood, Jack indicates another.

Again, there are innumerable ways for men to leverage these ideological cues—finding innovative, creative ways to make contemporary social, economic, and hegemonic norms accessible and flexible to their own unique narratives. Furthermore, the film, like *Pleasantville* and *Peggy Sue Got Married*, emphasises the 'nostalgic myth of small-town family values' (ibid.). Indeed, this myth has been 'imported from the ranch lifestyle of the frontier pioneers…to the middle-class suburb…thereby creating an apparently linear national narrative' (ibid.). The fantastical elements of *The Family Man* thus produce positive messages for multiple audiences. It validates the middle-class suburban family's version of success, complete with healthy relationships, engaging parents and children, as well as friends and neighbours. For the single career-minded successful individual, Jack's attempts to convince Kate at the end of the film to join him is encouraging of the possibility that one can pursue love and family and still manage to keep everything materially.

Critics tend to take a deeply cynical view about the film's economic message,[256] and it's true that *The Family Man* ignores the ugly political and economic realities found both in the dangers of those who romanticise capitalism as well as those who fail to notice that capitalism is not just wholly predicated on greed and uncanny luck, but also can welcome earnest competition. While the film is simplistic in its notions about capitalism, it does acknowledge the often baffling complexity of modern society and just how difficult it can be to discover solutions to those thoroughly modern problems. The film suggests that absent of any wide systemic relief or resolution of the capitalist's dilemma, individuals will need to guard against their own human frailties and decide the risks of where and how many eggs to put in their metaphorical baskets of life. As a feel-good story, the film avoids wild-card characters—such as Gordon Gecko in *Wall Street*—or potential criminal

only with Kate conceding to postpone her flight to talk to Jack, leaving her response to his proposal unresolved.'
[256] See Hicks (2003), Thomas, K. (2000) and Lemire (2000).

misdeeds that would force morality elements into the story and allow middle-class values to transcend the suburbs and to rehabilitate the Wall Street executive.

7.4 As a Rac(ial/ist) Text

At another level, alienation takes on a potentially more insidious and subtle discursive practice in the film than when it is couched in the struggle for true love. In *The Family Man*, the black magical figure Cash first appears as a convenience store thief, and tellingly, the convenience store is staffed—and probably owned—by Asians (most likely Koreans), who, despite being minorities themselves in the U.S., continue to have unabated racial tensions with black Americans.[257] And like other black magical figures in Hollywood films,[258] 'he seems both self-sacrificing and eager' as well as in a position of 'penultimate power and influence' (Hughey, 2009, pp. 543-577).

Cash also fits within the 'basic structure of [the] magical African American Male character' (ibid.). He has 'no history': Cash suddenly appears in the convenience store, and we have no idea where he came from or where he is going after he leaves Jack. In this sense, Cash appears 'other worldly'; he is a threatening figure (he pulls a gun on the store clerk in anger over what he claims to be a winning lottery ticket, and later threatens to shoot Jack); he has magical powers (which enable him to give Jack a 'glimpse' of an alternate life); and he remains 'invisible' through most of the film, appearing only when and where needed (in this respect, he remains a secondary character despite his powerful influence on the narrative of the

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[257] See Muhammad (2007, online) who reports on the results of a poll that reveals: 'Each ethnic group had a problem with the other groups—ranging from fear of Blacks, to mistrust of Asian business owners, to being envious of Hispanics who are thought to be taking away jobs, housing and political power from the Black community. The poll found that 61 percent of Hispanics, 54 percent of Asians, and 47 percent of Blacks would rather do business with Whites than members of the other two groups.'

[258] For example, Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) who helps Neo (Keanu Reeves) in *The Matrix*; John Coffey (Michael Clarke Duncan) who helps Paul (Tom Hanks) as well as others in *The Green Mile* (Darabont, 1999); Bagger (Will Smith) who helps Rannulph Junuh (Matt Damon) in *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (Redford, 2000); and Elijah (Samuel L. Jackson) who helps David (Bruce Willis) in *Unbreakable* (Shyamalan, 2001).

film, though we can probably imagine where he came from: the inner-city ghetto or the low-income housing projects, for example).

In *The Family Man*, Cheadle's character Cash appears suddenly, and his 'deal' with Jack is completed quickly. Thus, we must first ponder quickly just who this black man is: is he an angel or Satan himself? Or perhaps he is both. But in the narrative of the film, it doesn't really matter because his magical power permits us to stay comfortably within our racial blind spot. We continue to believe naively without guilt or fear that the character's semblance of being helpful or compassionate is sufficiently soothing to our collective desire for solving problems. However, this portrayal prohibits us from seeing with any meaningful depth what role race plays in how he appears to understand himself and how others perceive him. By staying within safer boundaries, the black magical character quickly proves his worth in order to be 'allowed' to stay in the white narrative of the film at all.

Furthermore, Jack's offer to buy the lottery ticket, and his suggestion that it is still possible for Cash to 'improve' his life, illustrates the film's attempt to show us that Jack—the white, main character—'is not prejudiced, that he is fair, has faith, and is a reasonable human being' (Hughey, 2009, pp. 543-577). Quite plainly, the film quickly seeks to discard any problematic notions that might arise in the American imagination about the black angel's role. Absent of any roots or groundings, the black character stays well above the realm of white supremacy, and the film makes it clear that black anger has no tangible legitimacy or justification.

When Jack tells Cash, 'there must be some programs out there and opportunities,' and his assertion, 'I got everything I need,' we must be convinced that Jack is a relatively 'good' and 'nice' guy, not a racist bigot. As Mukherjee (2006, p. 85) puts it, often times the 'white hero,' such as Jack, 'is resolutely colorblind and thus epitomizes hegemonic racial ideology.' We can therefore assume that Jack, as a contemporary white male, '[does] not and [has] never oppressed black people and [is] not accountable for the nation's racial past or present' (ibid.). As a result, *The Family Man* can be viewed as an attempt to recast 'the masculine as the newly marginalized position within American culture' (Jeffords, 1993, p. 207).

In this respect, then, 'the ultimate correctness, success or "rightness" of the White male character is clearly established through the blank helpfulness of the Black male' (Colombe, 2002, online). Films like *The Family Man* thus seem to

fulfill what Shohat and Stam (1994, p. 236) call 'a historically conditioned longing for interracial harmony.' America is, after all, in the conventional wisdom of the mainstream, a 'melting pot.' As admirable the attempt for reconciliation might appear, especially concerning the casting of black characters in subservient roles, the remaining impression nevertheless effectively isolates racially marginalised people yet further from a complex modern world of politics, dissenting ideologies, and formidable moral and ethical questions.

During the 1980s, Ed Guerrero (1993, p. 239) claims that Hollywood movies portrayed black characters—particularly males—as being 'in the protective custody, so to speak, of the white lead or co-star, and therefore in conformity with dominant white sensibilities and expectations of what blacks should be' like. But according to Mukherjee (2006, p. 84), films produced in the 1990s utilised the 'tactic of representationally condensing blackness with the feminine,' and as a result, '…Wiegman [1995, p. 118] has argued, the interracial buddy formula works instead to inculcate the black buddy into the "province of the masculine," marking such masculinity as the "precise measurement of America's democratic achievement."'[259] Mukherjee asserts that 'dominant truths about race and discrimination are woven into the narratives of Hollywood formula films,' such as *The Family Man*, which then serve to 'reinforce racial and gender hegemonies' (ibid., p. 86). Thus, by '[c]onstructing racial and gendered subjectivities in narrowly hegemonic terms and addressing racialized and gendered threats to social order,' *The Family Man*—and many films like it—'exemplifies the work of Hollywood cinema as racial regime' (ibid.). By casting characters in idealistically fantasised roles, Hollywood filmmakers not only isolate the characters from the black community, but also from thematic questions of politics, morality, and dissent. Hardly progressive, the portrayals soothe our apprehensions about racism, especially as commercial media seek to reinforce the notion that, in the era after the peal of civil rights movement protests, it does not exist anymore.

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[259] Mukherjee (2006, p. 84) claims that '[f]or Wiegman rescuing the black male from the feminine is a necessary cultural assertion by the nineties as a means of negotiating the threat of militant black masculinity and phallicized discourses of Black Power. Transforming long-standing tensions between black and white men into a "democratic fraternity," thus, the biracial buddy film of the nineties celebrates "America" as an exclusively masculine realm.'

Accordingly, *The Family Man* does not portray racism outwardly. Instead, it toes 'the official line on "the problem of race and gender," while asserting no particular claim to racial themes' (ibid., p. 88).[260] We need to move outward from the inner core to investigate further in discerning the intertextual layers of hegemony and tectonic ideological shifts. Black male characters who, as 'loyal sidekicks'[261] playing a supporting role, help a white—and usually male—character in some way, have a long tradition in American literature[262] and cinema. As Mukherjee states: 'The positioning of black characters as "helpers" serving to rehabilitate white protagonists out of crisis and collapse…is a familiar trope' (ibid., p. 95).[263] However, in mainstream Hollywood films—such as *The Family Man*—the black 'helper' occasionally takes on 'magical' or 'mystical' qualities, though they are still cast within the typical, old stereotypes that white audiences tend to associate with black characters: criminal, drifter, drug addict (and/or dealer), musician, preacher, sports figure, Uncle Tom, etc.

Despite the magical powers embedded in these newfound roles of black angels, Hollywood continues to keep the 'racist paradigms firmly in place' (ibid.). The American film industry has always strived to present 'happy ways to depict a troubled hierarchy,' or what has come to be known as 'the "embattled status quo"' in 'recent White male discourse' (ibid.). Hicks (2003, p. 28), for example, suggests

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[260] Mukherjee (2006, pp. 88-91) cites the following 'unexceptional cultural productions of the nineties': *The Long Walk Home* (Pearce, 1990), *I'll Fly Away* (Brand and Falsey, pp. 1991-1993), *Love Field* (Kaplan, 1992), *Corrina, Corrina* (Nelson, 1994), *Devil in a Blue Dress* (Franklin, 1995), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (Reiner, 1996), *Eve's Bayou* (Lemmons, 1997), *The Hurricane* (Jewison, 1999), and *Remember the Titans* (Yakin, 2000). These are 1990s films that did 'address racial antagonisms' by revisiting 'the spectacular horrors of the pre-civil rights South.'

[261] See Bogle (1973), Guerrero (1993), and Shohat and Stam (1994).

[262] Consider, for example, the vast amount of scholarship, theory and criticism focused on the relationship between the Nigger Jim and Huck Finn in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, such as Leslie Fielder's (1948, 1999) 'Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!'

[263] See Gooding-Williams (1993, p. 162) who quotes Toni Morrison who 'reads these black nurses and helpers as "a useful, convenient, and sometimes welcome means for propping up and stabilizing the patriarchal and capitalist social order."' Also see Levering-Lewis (2001, online) who 'notes similarly that "the role of the African American as surrogate for the troubles and malefactions of white people is as old as the Republic, a part carefully scripted in the antebellum South and archetypically acted out in American literature from Harriet-Beecher Stowe to William Faulkner and beyond"' (Mukherjee, 2006, p. 95).

'that perhaps black characters must be assigned saint-like goodness to counteract the racism white audiences automatically direct toward a black character on screen.' Therefore, 'for white audiences, a saintly black character is the moral equivalent of a "normal" white character' (ibid.). Or, as Appiah (1993, pp. 81-83) speculates, it is due to 'the Saint [who] draw[s] on the tradition of the superior virtue of the oppressed.'[264]

In *Ghost* (Zucker 1990), Oda Mae Brown (Whoopie Goldberg) is a charlatan African-American psychic who emerges as Hollywood's conventional black angel guarding a lost spiritual dimension not approachable by white people, endowed with powers to help them but not herself. The core idea has been repeatedly sustained with other Hollywood characters up to and including Cash in *The Family Man*. Navigating along an extremely thin line, Hollywood avoids repelling potentially large segments of the black audience by casting characters in roles where at some point, they have control over a principal white character. Situated therefore within the fantastical realm, *The Family Man* does not appear demeaning to black viewers nor threatening to white viewers.

The Family Man's pleasantries, however, do not fully obscure the incipient, insidious power behind the discourse—what Fairclough (1989, p. 39) suggests is the hierarchy where the more powerful treat discourse conventions in a 'more cavalier way, as well as to allow or disallow varying degrees of latitude to less powerful participants.' The danger here is that many Hollywood films, such as *The Family Man*, often 'offer people, especially Whites, narratives for experiences they may not have in real life' (Hughey, 2009, pp. 543-577), particularly when it comes to their knowledge of blacks and black American culture. 'In fact,' Hughey continues, 'in the absence of lived experience, films are often understood as "authentic" reflections

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[264] See Hicks (2003, p. 28) who quotes Appiah (1993, p. 83): '"Is there, in fact, somewhere in the Saint's background a theodicity that draws on the Christian notion that suffering is ennobling? So that the black person who represents undeserved suffering in the American imagination can also, therefore, represent moral mobility? Does the saint exist to address the guilt of white audiences, afraid that black people are angry at them, wanting to be forgiven, seeking a black person who is not only admirable and lovable, but who loves white people back? Or is it simply that Hollywood has decided, after decades of lobbying by the NAACP's Hollywood chapter that, outside crime movies, blacks had better project good images, characters who can win the NAACP's 'image awards?'"'

of "real-life"' (ibid.).[265] As Bernardi (2007, p. xvi) rightly points out, because Hollywood cinema is so pervasive in most Americans' lives, it often shapes 'our perceptions of each other,' and as a result, 'race in cinema is neither fictional or illusion. It is real because it is meaningful and consequential; because it impacts real people's lives.'

Therefore, applying CDA to films such as *The Family Man* reveals 'the racialized society that produced them [Magical Negro films]' (Hughey, 2009, pp. 543-577). From Fairclough's perspective, films can be viewed as 'cultural objects'[266] that 'resonate with[in] the larger society'[267] (ibid.). As cultural objects, films are 'produced, distributed, consumed and re-produced in reference to various cultural, technological, and/or social factors that are central to the navigation of everyday life' (ibid.). As such, *The Family Man* represents what Schudson (2002, p. 146) refers to as a 'public and cultural relation among object, tradition, and audience' whose racial undercurrents have the ability to resonate 'with audiences' understanding of race and reflects back to them racialized aspects of the "American character and experience" (Griswold, 1992, pp. 709-724)' (Quoted in Hughey, 2009, pp. 543-577). However, identifications and the recasting of them are radically unstable and continuously contestable.

Like other black angel films, *The Family Man* inserts the African-American angel into a sanitised world, scrubbed clean of the complicating politics of race and prejudice. The overtly racist stereotypes of past myths have been presently subsumed by a freshly comfortable reworking that allow some to re-imagine their social and cultural redemption. It is important to remember that Jack's initial attempts to help Cheadle's character is an act of 'kindness' which, Columbe (2002, online) claims, is

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[265] See Lipsitz (1998, p. 219) who points out how films portraying past race relations—particularly between whites and blacks—'…probably frame memory for the greatest number of people.'

[266] See Griswold (1986, 1992, pp. 709-724).

[267] See Schudson (1989, pp. 153-180, 2002, pp. 141-163) who notes: 'The relevance of a cultural object to its audience, its utility, if you will, is a property not only of the object's content or nature and the audience's interest in it, but of the position of the object in the cultural tradition of the society the audience is a part of. That is, the uses to which an audience puts a cultural object are not necessarily personal or idiosyncratic; the needs or interests of an audience are socially and culturally constituted. What is "resonant" is not a matter of how "culture" connects to individual "interests," but a matter of how culture connects to interests that are themselves constituted in a cultural frame.'

'a standard White response to the subject of race…it's not much of a problem anymore,' despite the fact that 'statistics on race and employment, incarceration, income and health all point to the continuation of [racial] inequities.' By showing that Jack is not a racist bigot, *The Family Man* serves to 'mark black racial consciousness as dysfunctional, to position it as "the thing against which normality, whiteness, and functionality [are] defined"'[268] (Mukherjee, 2006, p. 85).[269] By not seeing race—or, by being 'colourblind'—there is the mistaken assumption that such a stance would prefigure ideal racial relations in American communities but, in fact, a 'raceless' or 'colourblind' (my quote marks) identity constitutes the basis for whites to see themselves as normative and free from race or ethnicity.

While the concepts of equal opportunity in employment and education were institutionalised in the climatic phase of the civil rights movement, whites, on the basis of colourblindness, could now use those same concepts to oppose affirmative action. It becomes the pretext for denying the sheer existence of the persistent evidence of significant under-representation in economic opportunity for the nation's racial groups. By minimalising the notion of racism, individuals can suggest comfortably and normatively that discrimination is no longer the predominating factor impacting one's chances in life.

Still, these black magical characters serve as 'agents of change' who 'make amazing things happen' (Colombe, 2002, online).[270] In the process, however, the Magical Negro becomes even more 'unreal' due to his supernatural powers, and in essence is denied his own humanity because all of his energy is focused on helping and/or transforming the white main character. They become less realistically human, although their stereotyped images remain entrenched in the white psyche.

The Family Man, then, and other films in which the black magical 'helper' appears, begs the question: 'Why isn't the exalted Black male character presented as

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[268] Quoted from Kelley (1997, p. 3).

[269] See Gray (1995, p. 16) and Reed (1999, p. 205) for in-depth analyses of how white masculinity has become 'marginalised' in American culture.

[270] For Colombe (2002, online): 'The Black characters…have the power to propel a hero to greatness; they make the White male hero see or fight the good fight. (In Hollywood film, the person who fights for social justice usually gains rewards not generally garnered by those who actually fight for social change.). Sometimes…the Black male character passes some special power on to the White hero.'

"the hero" helped by a magical White man?' (Hughey, 2009, pp. 543-577).[271] The most obvious reason is that the film industry in the U.S. remains dominated by white men in power: producers, directors, studio heads, etc. Furthermore, Hollywood films are still being marketed to white audiences—in particular, white teenage males.[272] Indeed, the film industry remains a business, and its largest customer base remains white—not black, not Asian, not Hispanic, or any other minority group that makes up the fabric of modern America.[273]

As a racial text, *The Family Man* allows Cheadle's character Cash to 'operate on an *acceptable* (my italics) magical plane' (Columbe, 2002, online). This is not the kind of magic that can be used to make things suddenly disappear and reappear. Instead, it is magic that 'influences things that the White main character and audience cannot control—events, circumstances, biological processes' (ibid.). It is a 'fated' magic that is used to generate miracles that benefit the white main character: they are 'healed, they make the shot, they realize what they *must* do' (ibid.). As a result, we can 'feel safe when we know that the main man, the average white man who ultimately receives the benefit of the miraculous power, will succeed, will do the right thing, will become a hero who guarantees social safety' (ibid.). In the end,

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[271] Hughey (2009, pp. 543-577) also posits that the relationship between the black magical helper and the main white character 'reinforces a normative climate of white supremacy within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation whereby Whiteness is always worthy of being saved, and strong depictions of Blackness are acceptable in so long as they serve White identities.'

[272] See Wallace (1999, online) who asserts: 'In Hollywood, teenage boys hold the key to success of many mainstream movies.'

[273] Commenting on the conspicuous absence of black actors and filmmakers from the 83rd annual Academy Awards nominations, Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott, film critics for *The New York Times* (2011, online) wrote in referencing the 'fluid identity' associated with race: 'The recognition of that fluidity, and the exploitation of it for creative and commercial ends, has, from the swing era through hip-hop, been much more the province of America's popular music than its movies. Partly because movies remain a top-down, capital-intensive art form, they have been more cautious and apt to cater to rather than to subvert the perceived prejudices of the audience. In Hollywood race has often been a social problem to be earnestly addressed (and then set aside), or a marketing challenge.' The flipside, of course, is whether or not an artistically substantial black cinema movement can pay for itself. Responding to the commentary, film critic David Poland (2011, online) offered to explain why some critically acclaimed black cinema films failed at the box office: 'Even Tyler Perry movies…ticket buyers show up in much bigger numbers when Perry puts on the girdle. It's not because they are racist or Hollywood is racist…it's because audiences are more amused by a giant man in a dress than they are by earnest dramas about family and love.'

then, the narrative structure of *The Family Man* reconfirms the notion of black as the 'other,' once again blocking us from contemplating the unresolved realities of institutional racial oppression and discrimination, and from diagnosing the roots of our own internalised racist-based tendencies or temptations.

Farley (2000, online) attacked the way these black magical figures are portrayed in film in his *Time* magazine editorial, 'That Old Black Magic,' citing *The Family Man*, among other films in this study, as portraying what he calls 'Magical African American Friends (MAAFs).' He blames Hollywood for being ignorant of the reality of African American life and culture in America.[274] For Hicks (2003, p. 28), these portrayals of magical black men go beyond ignorance of black culture or even deep-rooted racism. It reflects what she calls a 'contemporary crises surrounding white masculinity.' She also claims that it is not only black men that are portrayed this way, but black women as well.[275] Hicks defines this masculinity crisis as men whose professional lives are depicted in films as being 'diminished by trends within a service economy that critic Donna Haraway has characterized as the "feminization of work"' (ibid., p. 29).[276] Working away in office cubicles on computer terminals or mobile phones hardly measures up to the aggressive metaphors of battle or physical combat associated with market trading floors or high-rise executive suites where multi-million dollar deals and trades are always at stake.

The black angel phenomenon of *The Family Man* as dissected by various critics has reemerged recently in significantly disturbing and unflattering ways. Even long before his 2008 election as president of the United States, Barack Obama was

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[274] Farley (2000, online) claims that 'MAAFs exist because most Hollywood screenwriters don't know much about black people other than what they hear on records by white hip-hop star Eminem. So instead of getting life histories or love interests, black characters get magical powers.'

[275] Hicks (2003, p. 52) cites *Ghost* and *The Matrix* as examples of films that contain black women with supernatural powers. In addition, she cites *The Gift* (Raimi, 2000) and *Michael* (Ephron, 1996) as examples of a white woman and a man (respectively) 'who possess supernatural or angelic powers.' Still, she claims that casting black men in these roles is more prevalent in the U.S. movie industry.

[276] See Hicks (2003, p. 29) who cites Haraway (1991, p. 166): '"Work is being redefined as both literally female and feminized, whether performed by men or women. To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading to an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex."'

envisioned within the province of the 'Magic Negro.' In some instances, the criticism came from unexpected sources. Early in the Democratic primary season, still long before it became apparent that Obama would trump Hillary Clinton's bid to become the first American woman president, black writer David Ehrenstein (2007: online) commented on the articulate, genial tone of his speeches delivered with a warm, unthreatening voice:

> Like a comic-book superhero, Obama is there is to help, out of the sheer goodness of a heart we need not know or understand. For as with all Magic Negroes, the less real he seems, the more desirable he becomes. If he were real, white America couldn't project all its fantasies of curative black benevolence on him.[277]

Weeks before the 2008 vote, political satirist Paul Shanklin (2008) wrote and recorded 'Barack the Magic Negro'—sung to the music of the folk classic, 'Puff the Magic Dragon' (Lipton and Yarrow, 1963) and owing its title to Ehrenstein's earlier column—which aired on national talk show host Rush Limbaugh's programme.[278] Roundly criticised for its overt racist tones, the song disappeared into obscurity only to be resurrected at the Christmas following Obama's election when a candidate running to be the Republican party's chairman sent out CDs of the song to the party's national committee members.[279]

For many, the incident cemented their perceptions of the blinders many right-wing Republicans have in appearing indifferent or even hostile to the ever-expanding diverse faces of communities throughout the nation. And, regardless of critics such as Ehrenstein, who remain unconvinced about Obama's intentions to

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[277] Ehrenstein (2008, online), a gay rights activist and critic who often writes about homosexuality in cinema, consistently has reiterated his dislike for Obama. After the election in 2008, he wrote: 'Barack Obama is neither a "visionary" leader nor a slick politician but simply an all-too-typical African-American heterosexual—clueless as to the history of the culture that bore him and blithely indifferent to those who anted up what a very important gay black American named James Baldwin called "The Price of the Ticket."'

[278] *The Rush Limbaugh Show* (or *The Rush Limbaugh Program*) is an American radio talk show hosted by ultra-conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh. The programme is aired live and consists mainly of Limbaugh's political monologues. Since its inception in 1988, it remains the highest-rated talk show in the U.S.

[279] The controversy quickly ended Chip Saltman's bid to become chairman of the Republican National Committee, a post eventually won by Michael Steele, the party's first African American chairman. See Rutten (2008, online).

change the face of American politics, the sharp extensive public rebuke to the song from many quarters underscored the political vulnerabilities of any candidate speaking to a continuously shrinking base of what he or she might perceive to be 'real Americans.'

The critical valorisation of difference alone constitutes a significant underlying current of cause of the widely publicised discourses concerning the crisis in masculinity and, in particular, that of white men. It becomes essential, then, to distill and track how identities are always traversed and crossed by other identities. The repositioned and sensitised public discussion attempts to go well beyond the neatly operationalised categories of race, nationalism, ethnicity, and social characteristics to discover how whiteness and blackness, as well as masculinity, are continuously articulated with each other, and with many other opposing identifying discursive threads—or as Fairclough (2003, p. 124) might note, how the relationships between the characters in these fantasy films 'may compliment one another,' or how they may 'dominate others.'

Hicks (2003, p. 29) finds the magical powers of black men in films such as *The Family Man* ironic because it 'serves as an expression of their economic vulnerability.' Furthermore, she claims that the relationships between the black men and their white counterparts is much more complex and goes beyond 'friendship.' In *The Family Man*, she sees Cash as being 'equated with a young child who facilitates' Jack's 'transformation,' a transformation that changes Jack 'from an autonomous icon of masculine power to a domesticated, unindividuated, and economically disempowered figure' (ibid., pp. 44-45). The film's pleasant dimensions suddenly seem more insidious. Viewed from this perspective, Jack's transformation is more harmful than helpful.[280] Nevertheless, the film insists on portraying Jack as 'a heartless bastard who only cares about money,' justifying him as a candidate for salvation from his spiritual impoverishment.

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[280] Hicks (2003, p. 54) cites several critics who felt that Jack's suburban life in New Jersey 'appears considerably less desirable than the glamorous…existence he enjoyed in New York.' For example, Thomas, K. (2000, p. F2) thought Jack's 'new life "seems pretty boring,"' and once Kate becomes his wife, she is '"more killjoy than dream girl."' Lemire (2000, online) asserted that director 'Ratner "can't decide whether to condemn suburbia for its domestic banality, or celebrate it for its comfort and reliability."'

Hicks claims that the 'ambivalent portrait of Jack's identity as a worker makes the role of the magical black male character, Cash…more complex than it first appears' (ibid., p. 46). As explained earlier, there are many similarities between the narratives featured in *The Family Man* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. However, there also are huge differences in the way in which Clarence (the angel in the earlier film played by Henry Travers) and Cash are portrayed. In *It's a Wonderful Life*, Clarence appears 'sweetly incompetent but well intentioned,' whereas Cash appears 'menacing and punitive' (ibid., p. 47). In fact, the 'glimpse' that Cash imposes on Jack can just as easily be read as a 'punishment for [Jack's] arrogance and economic privilege' (ibid.). And while this glimpse of an alternate life is meant to 'awaken him from his spiritual oblivion, it could as easily be understood as a painful subjection to all he had heretofore escaped' (ibid.). Like Clarence, Cash fulfills a therapeutic function, particularly in helping Jack find his way as a 'true family man.' Yet, it is instructive to contemplate how Cash's positive portrayal can be detrimental as a blatantly degrading image, relieving in part the tension of white guilt, but preserving to great degree the racist hegemony.

Furthermore, Jack's glimpse signals us to accept his 'economic disempowerment and feminization,' which, as Hicks claims, 'black men have long been associated in the service economy' (ibid.). Indeed, even Cash's name 'draws attention to the economic relations in which he is embedded' (ibid.), as evidenced in his attempt to cash in a lottery ticket at the Asian-run convenience store. The glimpse that Cash gives Jack 'suggests that while collective social relations can certainly be rendered in positive terms,' in *The Family Man* 'they constitute the sort of diminishment of power and freedom that black men have long suffered' (ibid.). Ironically, Obama's presence in the White House—unquestionably one of the strongest examples of positive normalising images for black masculinity—resurrects questions of racial confusion and crises in the widespread representational conservatism of American institutions (e.g. the Hollywood film industry).

After the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964[281] and the Voting Rights Act of 1965[282] became law, conservatives, including Ronald Reagan, certainly had given

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[281] A ruling that outlawed major forms of discrimination against blacks and women in the U.S., including racial segregation and the unequal application of voter registration requirements.

racists a new cover of political legitimacy. Adopting the rhetoric of freedom that influenced the civil rights movement in the first place, racists could claim the new laws unconstitutionally infringed upon the rights of freedom of association and individual states to govern themselves.[283] The effect, of course, was that everybody could slide back into their old ways, criticising those who did not fit the prerogatives of normalised images of racial masculinity.

For most of the film, *The Family Man* follows to the letter the all-too-familiar trajectory found in many films at the turn of the century. Through some event—real or magically realistic—the young yuppie protagonist confronts a reconsideration of values while his contact with an African-American persona—again, real (rarely) or magically realistic or even spiritual—who is lower in social strata brings about his enlightenment or salvation. And, in neat order, the protagonist is assured that these lower-ranked characters do not threaten nor begrudge his favoured social position from which they are excluded or barred from entering. Furthermore, the rehabilitated capitalist has settled his racial debt, so he no longer has to feel guilty about his privileges.

The Family Man can thus be viewed as a racially-charged text in which, in the end, we find that Cash is not a friend to Jack, because the glimpse he forces upon him can be viewed as a 'punishment…for his confident pleasure in his own socioeconomic [white] power' (ibid., p. 51). Therefore, Appiah (1993) is right in speculating that these black magical characters are not *really* friends to their white counterparts. Instead, '[t]hey are ghosts, or, at least, tips of a historical iceberg jutting into the present. And, as such, they are provocateurs, forcing latent troubles into the light of day' (Hicks, 2003, p. 47). Their presence raises the stunning underlying question about why mainstream society still finds it so difficult for any minority to be as fully vested in the institutional infrastructure as white individuals.

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[282] A landmark ruling that outlawed discriminatory voting practices that were responsible for disenfranchising the African American population in the U.S.

[283] Sullivan (2010, online) explains why Obama consistently has thrown the nation's neo-conservative base off its bearings: 'He is not, after all, the first black president. He is the first miscegenated president. He is a blurring of boundaries, a Hawaiian-Chicago-Black-Ivy-League-Child-Of-A-Single-Mother kind of blurring. The very complexity of his identity can threaten those whose experience simply hasn't been the same. (One thinks of [Sarah] Palin, for example, and her idealization of an America that requires a wild frontier of a Rockwellian Alaska to stay faintly as part of modernity).'

The film also makes it clear that Jack is not like George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*, because unlike Jack, George was sure that 'he had made the right decision in foregoing his own dreams for his family and community' (ibid.). *The Family Man* then emerges as a nostalgic text—albeit a racist and negative one—in that it offers a 'haunting presence of other lingering histories: black men systematically excluded from public, paid work because of the threat to white male hegemony they might pose if they had economic power' (ibid.). Indeed, this is why, Hicks suggests, they suddenly emerge from what can only be described as 'another,' otherworldly, 'dimension,' which makes them not only 'magical,' but also mysterious. All of this emerges as a sobering, if not profoundly pessimistic, commentary on the state of racial relations in the United States that endures today.

Far from the realms of fantasy film, we can reasonably anticipate that identity politics will continue to inform American social and political life in the Obama years.[284] The competition for power, influence, and prestige will likely be even more complicated and divisive, especially among historically marginalised groups that antagonise and foment tensions against another historically marginalised group. The point here is to show the continuing relevance of examining racial and racialistic discourses and texts. Just as in these films, the intricate and interlaced intertextual chains of identity on all aspects of hegemonic processes indicate that a complete, effective transcendence of race will still be virtually impossible to achieve—whether in the socially constructed milieu of fantasy films, or in the socially constructed and vigorously contested place of political leadership.

7.5 Conclusion

In many respects, *The Family Man* reaffirms the Reaganesque conceptions of family and marriage that were embedded in *Peggy Sue Got Married*, which was released 14 years earlier. With a story that begins in 1987 and moves forward 13 years, *The Family Man* is clearly a fantasy film about choice: the choices we make about who we love, where we live and work, whom we are friends with; indeed, who we are (our social identity). However, our choices are rarely made easily, especially when we are bombarded with so many options to choose from—options that are often

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[284] See Van Deven (2011, online).

dictated by a complex and interlaced array of social, cultural, demographic, ethnic, economic, political, and ideological factors. It could also be argued that 'there is a choice more fundamental than the choices we make within our daily social reality, a protochoice that establishes the very coordinates within which we choose' (Kornbluh, 2004, p. 113). And as Kornbluh rightly asserts: 'Hollywood cinema, arguably the most important ideological-cultural engine of today's world, devotes an entire genre to dramatic exposition of choice: the Alternate Reality story' (ibid.), to which *The Family Man* certainly belongs.

More importantly, the film avoids the subversive potential of Peggy Sue's inherent fatalism while simultaneously portraying, with emotion-tugging conviction, how the seemingly incoherent aims of family devotion and hard-driving economic motivation can be successfully harmonised in near-perfect Reagan form. As an alternate reality, 'forking path' narrative, *The Family Man*, like *It's a Wonderful Life*, focuses on 'the road not taken.' In *The Family Man*, however, Jack most certainly must make 'true' choices: either stay in his 'real' life as a successful Wall Street executive, where he has the power and money to do or buy almost anything his heart desires (but these can be considered materialistic, trivial choices), remain with Kate and his family in his New Jersey 'alternate reality,' or try to join the two (which is exactly what he tries to do once Cash ends Jack's glimpse). Indeed, choice is not a simple matter for Jack because all of his choices involve, in one way or another, alienation, capitalism, fantasy, and/or love.

However, in his uncharacteristic vulnerability, Jack can let himself go so that he can be 'reborn' as a kinder, gentler man. In the spirit of Reaganism, Jack, whose life as portrayed on screen is filled with hardship and difficulty, can redeem his privilege that had been delegitimised by his own personal suffering and conflict with capitalism. Professionals like Jack were those who had supported Reagan and his efforts at neo-liberal economic reform. The film's popularity resides not only in its star actor's presence, well-executed script and direction, and its somewhat satisfying ending, but also in its compellingly effective capacity to negotiate, for the particular benefit of those in the middle class with comfortable means, the tedium and tension of reconciling alienation, capitalism, and love by articulating a narrative that reproduces and redeems the angst which is alienation, capitalism, and love. The film reminds us just how resilient the Reagan narrative remains in the public's mind.

The Reagan narrative is woven even more deeply in *The Family Man* than it is in films like *Peggy Sue Got Married*. While the issues of race and class are completely skipped in *Peggy Sue Got Married*, they only manifest themselves just enough to introduce Cash's character without introducing racially fueled economic tensions that would menace the status quo framework of old-fashioned Reaganism. In the absence of fatalism, potentially subversive elements in *The Family Man* are difficult to discern, but they crop up in carefully couched warnings that come from Cash, the messenger-angel. Jack's crisis originates within his commodified displays of wealth and privilege and, ironically, while Hollywood narratives like *The Family Man* stimulate us to think about buying goods, they also remind us of the potentially large risks of the American Dream, and that accumulating power and material possessions is really an overdeveloped value.

But if power and materialism is an overdeveloped value, it is one that can be rectified without incurring the fatalistic prospects echoing in *Peggy Sue Got Married*. Key to Jack's quest to join his love for Kate with his love for his job and the money and power it provides, is alienation. That is, if Jack fails at his quest, he will most certainly end up, as he tells Alan (Saul Rubinek) towards the end of the film, '[c]ompletely, and utterly, alone.' Thus, Jack's alienation 'becomes the condition of possibility of the film's narrative intelligibility,' and '[i]n the process of becoming so intelligible, the film also accomplishes the association of social alienation with lack of romantic love' (Kornbluh, 2004, p. 123). However, Kornbluh and others ignore the potentially more significant issue of why and how manufactured products of culture and entertainment sustain, either deliberately or inadvertently, the incoherent simplicity of a Reagan world where genuine family love and a dedicated career focus can be harmonised without one or the other losing its intact value. As alluring as success and wealth are to the Hollywood film story, few directors are ever willing to let single-mindedly career-focused individuals enjoy the fruits of their success alone. *The Family Man*, like similar Wall Street films, cannot portray a character like Jack unproblematically without slipping in a message to edify or warn us about the traps and difficulties of a predominately materialistic lifestyle or career success and wealth.[285]

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[285] A good example being *Boiler Room* (Younger, 2000).

Ideologically, then, *The Family Man* sustains and redeems Reaganism and the neo-liberal economic foundation. However, unlike the alternate reality portrayed in *It's a Wonderful Life*, in which George Bailey can only choose one option, Jack succeeds by creating a reality that encompasses both options. What the film leaves unanswered, however, is whether or not uniting capitalism with love makes them both 'good.'

We will now turn to the last case study of *The Truman Show* and examine the power of the media to shape 'reality,' and the pervasiveness of 'voyeurism' in modern western society that became firmly ensconced with Reagan's stage mastery, and which has continued through today with each presidential election.

Chapter 8:
Case Study #6 of *The Truman Show*

8.1 Introduction

Like *Pleasantville* and *Peggy Sue Got Married*, Peter Weir's 1998 *The Truman Show* is also a fantasy text in the nostalgic form of Seahaven—yet another Hollywood representation of 1950s small-town America. On the surface, this analysis follows predictable themes already explicated in the previous case studies.[286] We are treated, once again, to a fragmented, historically contextual-less, romanticised version of America's past, which is then 'inserted into a mythic, eternal, and timeless present' (Jagodzinski, 2005, online).

Seahaven further represents a 'fantasy space of Hollywood and Disneyland combined, where dreams become "reality," fun is to be had' and 'a place of never-ending "beautiful days"' (ibid.). Also, as many critics have cited, Truman's last name, 'Burbank,' is home to Disney studios in California. However, many elements of the film's technical production go significantly toward blurring reality and fantasy in significantly convincing ways. In fact, Weir's production crew did not have to worry about recreating a town on a production lot once it was discovered that Seaside—a 90-acre planned community in northwest Florida that was built in the 1980s—was an iconic example of the type of stable, quiet community at the heart of Reagan's America. A classic vacation community of more than 300 cottages, Seaside has convenient amenities within an easy walking distance for any visitor, including a post office, art galleries, antique and novelty boutiques, bookstores, and restaurants. Like other suburban vacation communities in the United States, Seaside follows a rigorously monitored residential covenant, which dictates that each cottage follows a 'storybook' design, and every street in the community leads to the ocean.

Likewise, the clothing worn by Seahaven residents appears to be so ordinary and functional in design, style, and colours that they could easily be depicted in any pop Americana photo or painting without being tied to a specific era. In addition,

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[286] For example, Jagodzinski (2005, online) characterises the small town as 'a fantasy space where neighbors knew each other, sex was clean and wholesome (and hidden), everything was on a human scale with the right racial distance and mix, one had true friends and a loving close-knit family—much like the realtors of Los Angeles's walled-cities claim to be providing.'

Weir used unusual camera angles with oval and circular 'masks,' as well as hidden cameras in surprising locations (e.g., in jewelry or an ocean buoy) to show that Truman was constantly under surveillance. In fact, cameras were hidden in many spots throughout the actual Seaside community—including the distinctive sculpture near an insurance building where Truman worked—to fully recreate the center of production activity for the fictional television show.

The Truman Show is a product of cultural and ethical engineering that has shaped Truman's subjectivity. Truman, because he was born into this false world and therefore does not know any better, has been 'brainwashed' with a 'particular set of discourse conventions' that 'implicitly embodies certain ideologies—particular knowledge and beliefs, particular "positions" for the types of social subjects that participate in that practice…and particular relationships between categories of participants' (Fairclough, 1995a, pp. 93-94). For example, everyone in the film—except Truman—is an actor who has 'accepted' Truman's world as their own in order to make the television show more realistic for Truman and the fictional viewing audience. Consider Truman's 'wife' Meryl's (Laura Linney) statement during an interview:

> Well, for me, there is no…there is no difference between a private and a public life. My…my life is my life…is The Truman Show. The Truman Show is a lifestyle, a noble life. It is…a truly blessed life.

Thus, discursive conventions within the show have 'become naturalized and commonsensical' (ibid., pp. 94-106). However, as Truman starts to question his life in Seahaven, longing to travel and experience the real world, he is reacting to the 'engineering of [his] social identity' (ibid.). Every thread of Truman's sense of being is so extremely blurred that he no longer can vouch for what is real.

As the hyperrealities of his life have been abusively imposed upon him, Truman's choice is not merely arbitrarily accepting one reality over an equally 'real' one. Christof warns Truman that '[t]here is no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you. Same lies. Same deceit. But in my world, you have nothing to fear.' Instead, Truman must either despairingly accept his current abusively deceptive and fragmented narrative reality, or he must embark upon an

undoubtedly painful journey of emancipation into an uncertain narrative reality in which he will be unprecedentedly challenged. Truman's newfound capacity to discern reality is less an achievement of intellect than it is a courageous move out of his dysfunctional condition.

The choices facing Truman both accept and balk at Foucault's (1982, pp. 208-226) rejection of the 'self-governing subject.' Truman's challenge mirrors the everyday consumer's predicaments within the environment of consumerism. Each of us either can continue to accept the abusive, tedious, and tortured yet spectacular and lurid hyperreal nonstory, or we can muster the courage to embark upon our own healing and painfully uncertain journey leading toward an identity that arises from a different yet unknown narrative. In other words, the individual consumer's limited capacity to see through the gaps of the hyperreal surroundings indicates more about the profound depth of the tedium and suffering arising from consumerism than it does about the individual's latent capacity for intelligent contemplation and transformation.

The Truman Show also is a discursive text critical of America's brand of consumer-driven capitalism—another expected theme. However, it seems, at least initially, extremely ironic because Truman is basically a 'walking "blank" billboard' (Jagodzinski, 2005, online) who makes it possible for the show's parent company, OmniCam, to profitably sell virtually everything seen on the show. Consider the fact that when watching cable or satellite television today, almost every channel includes the company's logo on the screen where, according to Jagodzinski, it 'hovers ubiquitously,' leaving its 'holographic spectral and transcendental…mark on the body's unconscious' (ibid.). Thus, *The Truman Show* illustrates the 'constructed, designed, decentered, aestheticized self of cartel capitalism,' which 'replaces the now outdated modern nationalist subject as globalization progresses' (ibid.). Truman, as such, represents 'an exemplar of this subjectivity under the engineering guidance of his corporate Father' (ibid.).

Furthermore, Truman's postmodern de-centeredness is revealed in 'the narrative's double structure of the mirror' (ibid.), as evidenced in the beginning of the film when Truman is looking at himself in the bathroom mirror and fantasising about being an astronaut. This allows the fictional TV viewing audience to both sympathise and empathise with Truman because as a 'symptom of American society

itself' (ibid.), we are basically looking at ourselves in Truman. However, this assumption may seem too optimistic. We may think we know the Truman brand, and we may think we understand the larger American branding of consumerism, yet we fail to probe what it is that we find the most 'real' in the film and understand why that is so.

Within this amusement park-like enclosure, in which Truman is the unaware star of the greatest show on earth, he represents for the fictional TV audience everything that is supposedly missing in our postmodern lives: sincere individualism. Like several of his other films, Weir frames his chief protagonist with existential innocence and purity in a classic-hero-based narrative.[287] While Truman's entire life is a media construction, he stands completely apart from the 'phony' actors and actresses portraying his family and friends, and abundant evidence of plastic consumerism in the production back lot of his life.

While the TV audience within the film tends to view Truman's life in Seahaven as utopian, we, as viewers of the film, are able to see through its rosy veneer and recognise it for the dystopia it actually is. But as Marks (2005, p. 227) points out, it is '[t]his tension between utopian and dystopian possibilities and imperatives' that make *The Truman Show* a viable text that is critical of dystopia; a film 'that offers a compelling account of a seductive dystopian prison, and a freer, and therefore utopian world beyond.' Curiously, though, Weir lets us in on the deception quite early, so we could also assume, although not necessarily, that we would be more likely to identify with the manipulators than with the manipulated groups.

The Truman Show has also been extensively analysed as a text critical of reality television. However, what makes the film different from these shows is what Marks calls 'the utter banality of Truman's life, which is shown to be routine work and repetition' (Jagodzinski, 2005, online). Still, Truman represents an 'everyman' that both the fictional TV audience and we can identify with, which is why the show has such loyal fans. But unlike 'real' reality television shows, Truman is completely unaware that millions around the globe are constantly observing every facet of his

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[287] In *Witness* (Weir, 1985), for example, there are actually two heroes: a metropolitan cop and the young Amish boy who is suddenly plunged into an unfamiliar violent urban landscape. And in *Fearless* (Weir, 1993), the hero is the sole survivor of a plane crash.

life. Because there is 'no cam recorder whose gaze he can play into,' Truman becomes the 'symptomatic nightmare of living in a Baudrillardian consumerist world, which appears perfectly normal—until, of course, he begins to estrange it' (ibid.). He does not even have the benefit of the confessional room where he can 'talk' directly to the viewers—a feature initiated with MTV's *The Real World* (Bunim and Murray, 1992 – present) in the early 1990s that has been adopted by other reality shows.

The Truman Show is also heavily symbolic. The man in control is none other than Christof, which can obviously be read, 'Christ of.' While most critics have acknowledged this aspect of the film, taken from a Lacanian perspective, Jagodzinski (2005, online) digs even deeper into its Biblical references. For example, in Christof's attempt to stop Truman from leaving Seahaven by staging a raging storm at sea, he is, in effect, committing 'his own suicide…through the act of wanting to willingly kill (sacrifice) his "only" son that he created so the "show can go on"' (ibid.).[288] In other words, while it is possible to view Christof's attempt to kill Truman as effectively killing himself, Christof is indeed trying to save the television show and preserve the inner film that plays the narrative which we imagine and tell persistently about our surrounding world and about who we think we are.

Christof also represents what Žižek (2000, p. 130) calls 'an obscene supplement' upon which his absolute power relies. Truman and every other member of the cast and community engaged with the show are compelled to go along with the rituals and routines that make their acceptance and livelihood in the community possible. Jagodzinski (2005, online) cites the scene in which it is discovered that Truman is missing, and 'Christof's god-like voice commands that the lights be turned on (the artificial sun),' ordering everyone to drop whatever role they are playing to find Truman. The 'ethical relationship' between authority and the 'agency

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[288] Jagodzinski (2005, online) further points out: 'Truman (like Christ) left his parents' home on his 30th birthday. His pretend biological parent on the set, Kirk Burbank (Brian Delate), like the Biblical Joseph, and like the symbolic father of today's blending family, did not have much to say in the matter—no moral authority. In the end, neither did Christof. It seems that authority and responsibility had disappeared. This is a reflection of our own post-Oedipal world, whereas Lacan, (1992, p. 182) argued, the old modern order of desire ruled by an Oedipal father had begun to be replaced by the new order of the drives along with their accompanying festishizations of being, that is, jouissance (see Copjec, 1993, p. 182).'

of brute force (Žižek, 2001, p. 94)…has been vacated in postmodernity, desperately trying to be replaced and recuperated by reality talk shows. But no one has any faith in the answers that are being given' (Jagodzinski, 2005, online). All media forms now seem shallow, divisive, unreliable, and illegitimate.

We must remember that Christof is, after all, the reclusive 'marketing genius,' and executive director of 'The Truman Show.' As such, he 'has all the markings of a grand manipulator'(ibid.).[289] One of Foucault's (Danaher, Schirato and Webb, 2000, p. 68) most important insights into power is that it is 'more effective when it is hidden from view,' and 'although knowledge and technologies are being used to control and regulate individuals and populations, the official version of things is that they are "working in our interests," "taking care of us," looking after us and watching over us "for our own good."' In short, 'the "system is working for you"' (ibid.). Truman is obviously much more than an actor to Christof. He is more like a son, albeit a media-induced offspring. Consider the scene in which Christof gently strokes Truman's sleeping face on the giant monitor inside the television studio. And Christof's attempts to keep Truman in Seahaven, sheltered from the 'real world,' could be acknowledged as an act of love. Still, because Truman submitted to this life unwittingly, Christof has clearly exercised his power over Truman—a power that is almost God-like, and for many, immoral.

We should note that Truman is also willing to die to reach the island of Fiji, where he believes Sylvia (Natashia McElhorne)—his *true* love—awaits him. So motivated is Truman that he is able to face his fear of water and attempt an escape on a sailboat, to which Christof responds with a manufactured storm of Biblical proportions. In Lacanian terms, this scene illustrates 'love beyond the law…a feminine sublimation' (Jagodzinski, 2005, online, quoting Lacan, 1998, pp. 64-89). Driven by love, Truman effectively becomes a 'saint, a cause unto himself where the Big Other's [Christof's] desire no longer has any hold on him' (Žižek, 1997, p. 103)'

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[289] Jagodzinski (2005, online) deconstructs 'The OmniCam (L. Omnibus – all Corporation's motto, "Uno pro Omnibus, Omnes pro Uno" (one for all, and all for one)…The obscene shadow side of [Seahaven] is its function as a concentration camp for its One prisoner who represents us All, Everyman. The OmniCam Corporation is symbolic for transnational capitalism's reduction of everything to this totalitarian One: one market, one currency, and one standard of values—all the avatars of the phallus, the unary signifier—Logocentric. All.'

(Jagodzinski, 2005, online).[290] If there is any impending sense of martyrdom, Truman is not troubled by it.

In the film's final moments, Truman climbs the stairs and pauses before exiting through the stage door, heavily symbolic as a 'rebirth,' because by actually going through the door, which represents the birth canal, Truman is effectively leaving the safe haven of the 'womb' (Seahaven) that Christof has created for him. Despite Christof's stern warning of the consequences of entering the real world, Truman simply turns toward the camera and bids his oft-repeated greeting: '…and in case I don't see ya, good afternoon, good evening, and good night!' However, we cannot be sure what will happen to Truman next. Thus, Jagodzinski (2005, online) rightly questions: Will it be an all-too-typical happy Hollywood ending, with Truman meeting Sylvia in a loving embrace? Does Truman go on to discover that unmediated reality can heal his fragmentary, manipulated existence and help him find new meaning in his life? More broadly, does the film suggest that both options are fundamentally flawed and that there is a more workable third option? That is, the 'representational' technology of entertainment (e.g. television) does not have to be divorced from the renewed emphasis on direct experience.

In other words, in what ways does *The Truman Show* make us think about the larger implications of not just accepting our experiences for what they appear to be? It calls us to be curious, skeptical, and unabashedly inquisitive about the possibilities in our lives—and to do it in ways where we do not instinctively attribute those experiences to an independent reality. It encourages us not to alienate individual freedom, but to exercise our own agency for improving our lives and, consequently, our communities as well. We might even conjecture about the legal action Truman could probably take against the OmniCam Corporation—just imagine the settlement he could reach for 30 years of unpaid 'acting' service! Then again, it would be naïve to assume that such judicial romance could effect fully satisfying legal relief in a real-life courtroom.

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[290] Also see Žižek (1997, pp. 89-91).

8.2 As a Postmodern Fantasy Text

Of the six fantasy films examined in this study, *The Truman Show* is by far the most postmodern in that Truman Burbank is a walking soap opera whose life is continuously supervised by 5,000 cameras capturing every moment. Sold by his biological parents to a television studio prior to his birth, Truman has lived uninterruptedly within the completely enclosed and artificial town of Seahaven—a 'squeaky clean,' friendly town reminiscent of Pleasantville—surrounded by a cast of regular and guest actors who play their respective roles as Truman's wife, friends, coworkers, and fellow citizens. Behind the scenes, Truman's 'creator,' Christof, completely manipulates Truman's life and controls his every move with the help of a few primal fears instilled in Truman since birth—the most significantly effective being Truman's fear of water due to his fictional father's 'death' at sea when Truman was a child. Thus, Truman is unable to leave the 'island' of Seahaven as it is completely surrounded by an 'ocean.'

In his quest for sincerity and honesty, Truman begins to rebel and expose the façade that has kept him a media prisoner. While the film was praised for its originality by several critics after its release in 1998, the basic premise is not without precedent.[291] As a postmodern fantasy text, *The Truman Show* also reflects what Opperman (1998, online) calls 'the primal fear of the late twentieth century,' by 'demonstrating how people's most private moments are being filmed' and aired on television, as witnessed by 'reality' TV shows that now clog the airwaves with what their producers claim to be 'true entertainment.'

The film offers us a venerable smorgasbord of material for critical discourse analysis, for as Kokonis (2002, online) points out, 'the film, being reflective of the problematics of the postmodern condition in contemporary culture and life, raises the critical question of the direction New Hollywood has taken toward the spectacular and the glitz of show business.'[292] Ironically, while the Hollywood films of the 1980s

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[291] For example, Opperman (1998, online) cites Muriel Spark's (1957) novel, *The Comforters*, which 'tells the story of a woman who finds out that she is trapped in a novel about herself,' and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's (1973) film, *Welt am Draht*, 'in which the central character gradually realizes that he is only a "puppet on a string" in a huge computer simulation.'

[292] Kokonis (2002, online) also claims that the film '[i]nvites comparison with the calculated blockbusters within the "logic of late capitalism" phase of (post)modern

perpetuated nostalgic-heavy delusions about a stable, orderly landscape of the 1950s, the Hollywood of that earlier era was anything but predictable. The film industry was undergoing its greatest upheaval in its history as the after-effects of the 1948 Paramount Decree,[293] the antitrust actions that effectively ended the links between studios and theatres, saw the studio system's once-powerful creative and economic hold disintegrate. This resulted in many of Hollywood's best-known directors to rush toward the emerging television medium, while many formidable directors of television's earliest creative generations went to Hollywood offering bold cinematic statements relevant to the times. For example, youth-oriented films—targeting the rapidly expanding population of teenagers—showcased Marlon Brando and James Dean as definitive anti-authoritarian and rebellious heroes.[294] On the other hand, the aftermath of studio blacklists and Communist smear campaigns brought a wave of exploitative, anti-communist films, allegorical as well as propagandistic, that sought to capture the paranoia-driven fears of being accused of having Communist sympathies.[295]

Unquestionably, in terms of social, economic, and political impact, television has been rendered as the most important reality machine in history, ever since it entered American living rooms in the early 1950s. Taking Baudrillard's apocalyptic view of television to the extreme, the uncritical audience will interpret reality in terms provided by television, rather than vice versa. In the formative years of television's growing prominence, the medium was heralded for its promise of 'real entertainment'—a curiously odd turn of art and entertainment, which would project

culture…In terms of its thematic concerns, the film also invites scrutiny on the politics of the image (surveillance, corporate control vs. individual freedom)….'

[293] A landmark U.S. Supreme Court anti-trust case that ended the movie studios' ability to own theatres while holding exclusivity rights on which theatres would show their films. This decision also changed the way Hollywood movies were produced, distributed, and exhibited because it ruled that the existing distribution scheme violated U.S. anti-trust laws that prohibit certain exclusive dealing arrangements. By effectively ending the studio's vertical integration system, it was seen as 'the first nail in the coffin' of the old Hollywood studio system.

[294] For example, *The Wild One* (Benedek, 1953), and *Rebel Without a Cause* (Ray, 1955).

[295] One of the most notorious examples was *Red Planet Mars* (Horner, 1952) about an ex-Nazi scientist working for the Communists (intent on destroying American democracy) by bouncing radio signals off the ionosphere and making them appear to be coming from advanced extraterrestrials on Mars, and then interpreted as being the voice of God.

transcendental representations of art on the screen, capable of giving audiences a more profound understanding of the world and of themselves, even as it helps us escape reality.

However, it quickly became apparent how advertising revenue fueled television's growth throughout the 1950s as the A.C. Nielsen ratings agency fine-tuned its capabilities for measuring audience size.[296] Vance Packard's 1957 exposé, *The Hidden Persuaders*, targeted television as a major culprit in manipulating the American consumer.[297] And in 1961, Newton Minow, who had just been named chairman of the Federal Communication Commission in the U.S. federal government, told broadcast executives that television was 'a vast wasteland,'[298] funded by a seemingly endless supply of commercials. Hence, we should not be surprised that everything seen on 'The Truman Show' is available for purchase to the fictional TV viewers through a catalogue.

Ideologically, then, the film reflects Jameson's (1991, p. x) view of the 'cultural logic of late or consumer capitalism,' as well as a 'fundamental shift in the notion of consumption in our consumer society,' which, as Featherstone (1995, p. 75) claims, has switched from 'a mere reflex of production' to a more pronounced form of 'social reproduction.'[299] Sadly, though, what is really for 'sale' to the

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[296] See Webster, Phalen and Lichty (2006).

[297] Packard explored the morality of the use of consumer motivational research and other psychological techniques used by advertisers to manipulate expectations and create desire for products, especially in the American postwar era. He also explored the manipulative techniques of promoting politicians to the electorate.

[298] From Minow's speech given to the National Association of Broadcasters convention on 09 May 1961, in which he criticised television broadcasters for not better serving the public's interest: 'When television is good, nothing—not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers—nothing is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there for a day without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit and loss sheet or a rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to the set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland' (Minow, 1961, online).

[299] According to Kokonis (2002, online), Featherstone (1995, p. 75) is continuing both Baudrillard's (1983, 1993) and Jameson's (1991) arguments about postmodern culture: '…the term consumer culture points to the ways in which consumption ceases to be a simple appropriation of utilities, or use values, to become a consumption of signs and images in which the emphasis upon the capacity to endlessly reshape the cultural or symbolic aspect of the commodity makes it more appropriate to speak of commodity signs. The culture of a consumer society is

viewing public is Truman's life itself, which Christof describes at the onset of the film:

> We've become bored with watching actors giving us phony emotions. We're tired of pyrotechnics and special effects. While the world he inhabits is in some respects counterfeit, there is nothing fake about Truman himself. No scripts, no cue-ons. It's not always Shakespeare, but it's genuine. It's a life.

Christof is thus offering the global TV audience a 'true man,' but what he doesn't admit, and what is blatantly obvious given the constant plugs the actors give to products on the show, is that 'The Truman Show' depends on this 'commodification of culture' in order to survive. After all, it is a television show, and television shows need to generate advertising revenue.

As a show within a show ('The Truman Show' within *The Truman Show*), the film offers us the 'ultimate commodity' that Huang (2007, online) describes as 'the spectacle of artificial, technically-designed and simulated realities as *true* life' (ibid.). Thus, it is tempting to read the film from Foucault's 'panoptican'[300] perspective in that Truman's life within Seahaven is a '"totally administered" society' (ibid.). However, Huang rightly claims that it is 'wrong…to see "The Truman Show" as nothing but simulation and nothing to do with reality,' for although it is 'false' in the sense that it is a fictional world in which Truman lives, 'the show is real in the sense that something in it more than itself sticks out of the scene, though the studio strives but fails to repress it' (ibid.). For example, the film portrays people from the 'outside' trying to 'intrude' on the show; Truman's wife Meryl continually inserts product plugs into her conversations with her 'husband'; and Truman hears 'voices' that make him increasingly paranoid and suspicious. As a result, Truman begins to seek the cracks in his hyperreal surroundings.[301]

Furthermore, even though Truman appears to be incredibly naïve and unaware of the fact that his life is 'fake,' he is not 'ideologically neutral,' and thus

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therefore held to be a vast play which destabilizes long-held symbolic meanings and cultural order.'

[300] See Foucault (1977).

[301] See O'Donnell (2000, p. 7) who explains that the world in which Truman lives (Seahaven) is 'replete with objects of desire to which he has immediate access, but these objects become [holes or gaps] in the audience's symbolic universe.'

we 'should not see the audience's and Truman's world and desire as ideologically oppositional to each other' (ibid.). Indeed, Truman's quest for freedom demonstrates what Žižek (1999b, online) defines as 'the ultimate American paranoiac fantasy,' which, Huang (2007, online) claims, is 'an substanceless consumerist paradise deprived of material inertia and, at the same time, the symptom of that fantasy, the suspicion that the world is a faked spectacle, a gigantic [staged] show.'[302] One could say the same thing about the craft of American political theatre as perfected by Reagan and his campaign team. However, the spectacle has mutated into something far beyond even the wildest dreams of Reagan's image handlers. Today's political and ideological lightweights—Donald Trump and Sarah Palin, to name a few— effectively have exploited their own versions of sparkly political theatre to a readily accommodating corps of mainstream press and political pundits.

Likewise, Christof is also counting on his audience to avoid thinking about the larger picture so the antidote for the missing genuine experience can be found on live television.[303] 'The Truman Show,' which is broadcast worldwide, also reflects 'a sense of time and space fragmentation' (Kokonis, 2002, online), and Sobchack (1990, p. 58) refers to this 'fragmentation' as 'All surface" because '…electronic space cannot be inhabited.'[304] Weir achieves this fragmentation by skillfully manipulating the 'spatio-temporal coordinates of three textual levels,'[305] which

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[302] For Huang (2007, online): 'It is reasonable to see The Truman Show as a parable on contemporary reality soaps; both act out the anxiety toward not being sufficiently exposed to the camera/Other's gaze, which turns out to be the ontological guarantee of the subject's being.' Also see Žižek (2001).

[303] Based on this assumption, Kokonis (2002, online) cites Denzin (1991, p. 51) who states: '…the preoccupation with the live event after it has occurred, the replaying of newsworthy events, the simultaneous broadcasting of an event and its reproduction on screen that audience members can watch, in case they missed what they just witnessed.'

[304] According to Sobchack (1990, p. 58) this is because electronic space 'denies or prosthetically transforms the spectator's physical body so that subjectivity and affect free-float or free-fall across a horizontally/vertical grid. Subjectivity is at once decentered and completely extroverted—again erasing the modernist (and cinematic) dialectic between inside and outside and its synthesis of discontinued time and discontinuous space as conscious and embodied experience.'

[305] Kokonis (2002, online) explains these as follows: '[I]n the True-talk interview the camera captures, in the small frame, Sylvia looking at Christof on her TV screen, which includes an insert small "window" of Truman having breakfast.'

presents us with 'three distinct ontological levels'[306] that produce 'different perspectives and perceptual sites [signaling] an uncertain subject position via-à-vis narrative space and time' (Kokonis, 2002, online). For the loyal fictional viewers of 'The Truman Show,' the lines become so blurred that they are confused about what is real and what is fictional.

Astute science fiction fans will likely draw the connection between the television production set in the film to the holodeck featured prominently in several episodes of the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Roddenberry 1987-1994). For example, in the episode 'Ship in a Bottle,' the characters were deceived into thinking that they were in the 'real' environment of the Enterprise starship when, in fact, they were in the holodeck simulator. The holodeck was often used to transport crewmembers while they were unconscious or asleep. Similarly, the simulation environment is virtually indistinguishable from the real one in the most recent blockbuster film *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009), as well as the immensely popular Nintendo Wii game console system. As Jones, Lombard and Jasak (2009, online) explain: 'Due to this extreme fidelity, revealing the simulation for what it is cannot occur independently of the memory of being in the "real" world.'[307] As compelling as this statement appears to be, memory is not consistently reliable as individuals pick and choose their memories and use those bits to shape broader perceptions and recollections, both consciously and unconsciously.

There is also something profoundly Reaganesque in all of this. Delusions about Reagan's accomplishments were widely shared and communicated by media commentators and by authors with impressive historical credentials. While Reagan, rather remarkably at least in public view, even believed the way he lived in his artificial presidential bubble as an authentic representation of American life and values, the cementing of a popularised view of his historical legacy was as much a

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[306] Kokonis (2002, online) explains these as 'Truman's world at the hypodiegetic level, subject to the gaze of Sylvia's and Christof's world, as they occupy the diegetic level, and the hyperdiegetic level, effected by the gaze of Christof's panoptic tower, a gaze which controls both the hypodiegetic and the diegetic worlds, and coincides with that of the actual spectator.'

[307] Jones, Lombard and Jasak (2009, online) elaborate: 'In other words, the only reason one would recognize such environments as a simulation is the memory of having been in the "real" world and the observation that the currently experienced world (the simulation) is not the same in some (even subtle or trivial) way.'

product of a whole cadre of Christofs as it was his or those of his closest confidants in the White House.

What was particularly striking about Reagan was not the artificiality of his public presentation, but the extent to which it infused and shaped his private experience.[308] Likewise, those Reagan disciples who were directing the public show succeeded, nearly wildly so, in channeling the American appetite for 'feel-good' spectacle. Indeed, many Americans 'wanted Reagan to happen' (Dewey, 1999, p. 7).[309] Similarly, in *The Truman Show*, as in the eight years of the Reagan presidency, the televised theatre of play constitutes the public life. As Green (2005, p. 35) explains: 'the legitimating functions of culture has been overtaken by the uses of culture as a commodity.' Postmodernism abolishes the autonomy of culture through its 'prodigious expansion' (Jameson, 1991, p. 48), literally the culturalisation of everything.

Postmodern art and culture are no longer oppositionally related to the wider world, affirming the existence of a better place, both elsewhere and otherwise. Instead, everything is fully present; everything is connected. And, just as Seahaven, to a certain degree, builds upon the nostalgic memories of the 1950s, the contemporary account of Reagan's legacy from the 1980s, especially by those who seek to recreate his unreal politics of optimism, aggressively sidesteps some of the most critical faults. These include a debt-ridden economic boost fueled more by borrowed monies squandered on commodities and consumerism than by thoughtful, strategic investment. The Reagan legacy account almost always fails to acknowledge the systemic declines in the economic and political institutions that came under the president's stewardship.

Only when Truman becomes skeptical and starts looking for inconsistencies does he begin to gain the capacity for discovering the truth amidst this technologically complex scenario. While the lack of congruency in the short-term

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[308] See Joan Didion's (1992, pp. 25 - 46) essay, 'In the Realm of the Fisher King,' in *After Henry*, a portrait of the Reagan White House.

[309] According to Dewey (1999, p. 7): 'We participated in the decade. We elected to believe, for instance, in the elegant pseudoarithmetic of Reaganomics, historic cuts in taxes coupled with profligate spending, a sort of Master Carded "recovery" that violated the simplest rules of balancing a household checkbook…Our complicity in the Reagan Era suggests that we were something other than enchanted, drugged, gullible or simply victims of cynical fantasy wheelers intent on regaining political power….'

vision is overwhelmingly evident, only a few seem to even begin tracing the genealogy of the inconsistencies in the popular and historical records that stretch back toward the time when they originally were entered into the discourse. In the days immediately following Reagan's death in 2004, officials of the nonprofit Ronald Reagan Legacy Project[310] reiterated their call to see some form of permanent tribute to the late president in every county of the United States—the paramount effort to make indelible the memory of Reagan as a leader whom everyone could love.

As Perlstein (2004, online) explains, the not-so-innocent project, if successful, could have enormous consequences for those who see themselves as the rightful inheritors of the manufactured Reagan legacy because 'they will have scrambled history instead of helping to inform it…Reagan was always much more frightening than the sunny optimist of now-popular legend.' His political heirs, in fact, have amplified his claims about an irreparably corrupt, greedy government in convoluted twists that have only heightened the disillusionment of apathetic voters who turn out in increasingly smaller numbers with each election.

In 'The Truman Show,' the actors are part of Christof's larger project. Meryl and Truman's 'best friend' Marlon (Noah Emmerich) state during an interview: 'It's all real. Nothing about it is fake. It's merely controlled.' But because both we (the real) and the fictional audience know that everything about Truman's life *is* 'fake' and manipulated, 'The Truman Show' is no different from today's television docudramas, telenovelas, soap operas, and, most especially, reality shows. However, unlike Truman—who wants to escape his media prison—contestants for shows like *Big Brother* (Grodner and Meehan, 2000-present), *Survivor* (Parsons, 2000-present), *American Idol* (Fuller, S., 2002-present), and *The Bachelorette* (Fleiss, 2003-present), etc. are exhibitionists desperately clamouring to enter it, believing their good fortunes or hopes for economic, personal, or romantic success can be scripted to their advantage.

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[310] Created in 1997, ATR's Ronald Reagan Legacy Project has worked toward seeing each county in the U.S. commemorate the former president in a 'significant' and 'public' way, such as the naming of a public building. The project has also supported efforts to place Reagan on the ten-dollar bill, and has encouraged state governors to declare February 6 as 'Ronald Reagan Day.' [online] Available at: http://www.ronaldreaganlegacyproject.org/ [Accessed 15 October 2011].

Kokonis (2002, online) is also right in his assertion that 'we become bemused watching the reactions of the "real people" onscreen, the fictional audience of ['The Truman Show'].'[311] Considering the amount of television the average American watches on a daily basis,[312] it is not a stretch of the imagination to envision that a real 'The Truman Show' could one day become a reality. Stanley Kauffmann (1998, online) astutely asserts this in his review of the film: '…the captive of TV is not Truman, it's the audience, US. And our love of that captivity, the gobbling of shows…engulfs us.'[313] Skepticism alone, however, is insufficient to crack this puzzle. Clearly, many, if not most, Americans remain addicted to television, especially as corporations begin to figure out the business model for merging the medium with the Internet to achieve commercial success.

The Truman Show does echo Baudrillard's (1988b, p. 12) claim that Americans are vulnerable to the 'obscene' nature of the 'ecstasy of communication' that he believes shapes postmodern life and culture in the U.S. and throughout the world. Such assessments are disquietingly and frighteningly pessimistic. Who can anyone trust to tell the truth about one's own identity? Incapable of generating our own self-knowledge, we have abdicated that responsibility to makeover artists, public relations people, propagandists, politicians, doctors, celebrity spokespersons, televangelists, or advice hucksters on television infomercials doing cross-promotions for their books in bookstores or on online digital stores. Baudrillard, in part, is suggesting that by deleting our old forms of the referential universe, we are now well

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[311] See Bolton (1998, online) who states: 'A handful of them become familiar. The man who never seems to leave his bathtub; the parking garage attendants who would rather watch the show than retrieve your car; the patrons and employees at a place called "The Truman Bar," where it seems that no one ever thinks or talks about anything else.'

[312] According to a 2010 study: 'Television continues to dominate the media usage habits of Americans,' and 'more time is spent with television each day than any other medium—over 5 hours for Adults 18+ and high levels across all age, income and education breaks.' [online] Available at: http://www.tvb.org/4685/about_tvb/press_room/press_room_article/13702 [Accessed 24 August 2011].

[313] Kauffmann (1998, online) adds: 'We used to go to theaters and films, now, more seductively than radio, TV comes to our homes, entwines us…The shows don't have to be dramatic, as "The Truman Show" and most TV attests. They need only to be shows, life outside transmitted to the TV inside.' Also see Yesil (2001, online) who supports this claim and cites Miller (1984, p. 719): '[T]he audience has blithely endorsed the very product, television, which has made it captive.'

within the process of deleting our own identities and giving greater leeway to mass media which, incrementally yet steadily, is taking more control of identity construction at the expense of traditional influences such as family, school, church, and others.[314]

However, not everyone accepts—myself included—this extreme dire nature of Baudrillard's assessment. Yesil (2001, online), for example, claims that reality television is popular because 'contemporary culture is stitched together with personal modes of expression and personal confessions. There's an unflagging interest in human stories, personal stories, and authentic stories.'[315] Perhaps, then, Christof is right in his assertion that we have grown tired of actors playing make-believe characters in make-believe parts in make-believe stories.

For one contestant in the British version of *Big Brother* (Hepworth, 2000-present), her life and career—broadcast in virtually the entirety of her adult years—was so compellingly interchangeable that one wonders if a Hollywood script could ever have possibly improved upon the protagonist's story. Prior to finding media fame on the third season of the show, Jade Goody lived in a nondescript apartment in the southeast London area with a boyfriend and mother, both of whom were battling significant drug addictions. In the second act, five years later (in 2007), she was a contestant on a celebrity version of the same show, but this time was ejected for racist behaviour.[316] As a result, she was forced to reboot her career after her promotional endorsements were cancelled. In the final act, she learned on air during the broadcast of India's *Bigg Boss*[317] (Natiq, 2006-present) that she had terminal

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[314] See Benjamin, W. (1968).

[315] Yesil (2001, online) cites media scholar Dovey (2000, p. 26) who 'argues that the yearning for subjectivity, for the personal, for the intimate is the "only remaining response to a chaotic, senseless, out of control world in which the kind of objectivity demanded by grand narratives is no longer possible.'

[316] The *Celebrity Big Brother* (Hepworth, 2001-2010) racism controversy was due to comments made by contestant Jade Goody, glamour model Danielle Lloyd, and singer Jo O'Meara, which were directed towards Indian actress Shilpa Shetty. The controversial comments resulted in national and international media coverage, responses from the UK and Indian governments, and the show's suspension during the 2008 season. After the show, Goody acknowledged that her comments appeared racist and apologised for any offense caused, and Shilpa later told the media that she forgave Jade.

[317] *Bigg Boss* is an Indian reality television show in which a group of contestants live in a house that is a television studio, complete with cameras and microphones in most of the rooms to record the activity of the housemates. The only place where the

cervical cancer. Goody battled her cancer in public, ending in her death at the age of 27 in 2009. Her life had completed the cycle: discovered and celebrated, then vilified, and finally redeemed and vindicated. Catlin Moran (2009, online), a *Sunday Times* columnist, offered the following as a possible answer: fame is no longer 'a precious commodity, that should be given only to those who are deserving.' Instead, Goody's was 'a new kind of fame,' one that 'is rather like cancer. IT makes no character judgments. And in the end—also like cancer—it can happen to anyone' (ibid.). As for viewers, the reality television phenomenon feeds their imagined roles not only as passive spectators, but also as active participants in a shared national programming venture or—in the case of *American Idol*—as makers of a new generation of stars and celebrities.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, reality television is the product of our postmodern angst: 'our hatred, fear, affection, and desire for the "low"' (Yesil, 2001, online), which seems to transfix audiences in much the same way 'The Truman Show' transfixes its fictional viewers. At a certain point in the plot, perhaps at the end of the film or programme, viewers will look for and identify some reference point that acknowledges that they have been fooled and they can move forward in their own interpretation, confident that the opposite of what they had believed is true. Rose and Wood (2005, p. 294) suggest that adopting a playful or ironic approach often helps viewers negotiate an 'authentic' experience of the inauthentic elements of reality television programmes. They observed that those viewers who reported positive viewing experiences 'wondered why the cast members acted or spoke as they did… what they would do if in the cast member's place…what the producers were "up to" …what actually happened and what might have been.' The fictional viewers of 'The Truman Show,' whom we clearly see having a 'positive' viewing experience, exhibit all of these traits, and thus they can successfully 'negotiate' their 'Truman Show' viewing experience.

As Denzin (1991, p. x) distinctly claims, 'postmodern society is a dramaturgical society,' which reveals the 'cinematization of contemporary life.'[318]

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housemates can escape the other contestants is in the 'Confession Room,' where they are encouraged to express their true feelings.

[318] According to Denzin (1991, p. x): 'First, reality is a staged, social production. Secondly, the real is now judged against its staged, cinematic-video counterpart (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 152). Third, the metaphor of the dramaturgical society

Weir has structured *The Truman Show* from a voyeuristic perspective and achieves this through a 'window within a window stylistic approach' as well as a 'film within a film narrative structure' (Kokonis, 2002, online). The film somewhat mimics *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954), which Stam (1985, pp. 29-71) calls 'a paradigmatic study of spectatorship and voyeurism.'[319] But unlike *Rear Window*, in which only one character held 'the position of the panoptic voyeur's gaze,' thereby 'subjecting the whole world around him to [his] scrutinizing look' (Kokonis, 2002, online), in *The Truman Show* the opposite occurs: it is only Truman who is being constantly watched by the viewers of the television show, and by us, the viewers of the film.

The Truman Show acutely illustrates the blurring of the 'real' against the 'staged,' and in doing so, 'the film pushes the epistemological commitment to cognitive values (Truman's search of existential knowledge) to the ontological issue of world making and unmaking—a clearly postmodern endeavor' (ibid.). Christof genuinely believes that Truman—and the film is implying that all of us—can live a more 'true' and 'authentic' life within a media-created artificial reality, so long as it provides us with more safety and comfort than the real world. Here, Christof is echoing *Videodrome* (Cronenberg, 1983): 'There is nothing real outside our perception of reality, is there?' If programming is no longer an optical illusion, or certainly no less than other realities, then it becomes impossible to distinguish between reality and fiction or reality from fantasy. Christof has assured us that verisimilitude is irrelevant and the primary interest is within the show, which has linked the real and imagined world. Fiction has accomplished more than merely reproducing reality. As in *Videodrome* or in the holodecks of science fiction, the simulation substitutes empirical reality, adds to it, and improves it.

Truman's postmodern condition intensifies as he becomes increasingly paranoid about his inability to leave Seahaven, as well as his increasing awareness of the 'artificial' behaviour of those around him, including his 'best friend' and

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(Lyman, 1990, p. 221), or "life as theater" (Brissett and Edgely, 1990, p. 2), has now become international reality. The theatrical aspects of the dramaturgical metaphor have not "only creeped into everyday life" (Goffman, 1959, pp. 254-255), they have taken over. Art not only mirrors life, it structures and reproduces it.'

[319] Kokonis (2002, online) claims that *Rear Window*, 'as a quasi- or covert metafiction, marked a transition from modernism to postmodernism by foregrounding its ontological questions through the device of the unreturned gaze, of the voyeur-vu, that shattered the "fourth wall" of conventional theatricality.'

'wife.'[320] The film also works as a postmodern text by exhibiting, intertextually, the characteristics of other films.[321] The scene in which the stage light drops from the Seahaven 'sky,' for example, is reminiscent of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968) when apes touch a mysterious slab. In fact, claims Kokonis (2002, online): 'Truman's motions and tentative touching of the object, literally appearing from nowhere, seem to have been patterned on the movements of the apes.' And Whitehouse (1998, p. 10) points out: 'The Truman Show depicts soap opera as a spectacular conflict between a man and his god, a worker and his employer, a "father" and his son and—if we can indulge in a little more intertextual metaphor, a star and his studio.' Clearly, the film is postmodern in every imaginable aspect of the term.

But how should we interpret the film's ending? Because we have no way of knowing what will happen next to Truman once he leaves Seahaven, Huang (2007, online) suggests that we should 'avoid embracing the truth-value of the film at its surface,' and instead 'take the ending as a typical tragicomic one, in which the happy dénouement does not really solve the fundamental ideological tensions.' This is because in Truman's decision to leave the simulated reality of Seahaven, 'he still falls prey to the fantasy of the subject [he was] supposed to enjoy' (ibid.). Viewed from this perspective, *The Truman Show* seems to end 'with a cynical detachment that leaves the fundamental fantasy and status quo intact, an interpassive gesture of being active to remain passive' (ibid.).

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[320] Kokonis (2002, online) explains that unlike previous films such as *The Parallax View* (Pakula, 1974) or *The Conversation* (Coppola, 1974), 'themselves landmarks of paranoid fiction from the mid-Seventies, Romney (1998, p. 39) claims: "[I]n the Nineties strain of paranoid cinema, the stakes seem at once more rarefied, more to do with the feeling that there is little verifiable reality in the screen image itself, and by extension, in the world we know through visual media. It's no longer a question of who is to be trusted, as in the Seventies, but a question of whether anything, any image, any evidence of the state of things, can be trusted."'

[321] For example, Kokonis (2002, online) compares the Seahaven town square to towns depicted in *Day for Night* (Truffaut, 1973) and *Groundhog Day* (Ramis, 1993). He also compares Truman to Thorswald (Raymond Burr) in *Rear Window*, and to the characters in *They Live* (Carpenter, 1988) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Kaufman, 1978). Finally, he compares the scene in which Truman encounters Christof to Vonnegut's (1973) novel, *Breakfast of Champions*, in the way the 'self-reflexive narrative techniques' point to 'the epistemological reading of the story, as an existential quest of self and [Truman's] place in the universe' (ibid.).

As another example, for elected officials and political supporters undoubtedly seeking to enhance and consolidate the Reagan legacy in its fully positive form, the persistent cynicism and skepticism of faith in American political opinion polls is a welcome factor. Those so utterly disillusioned or highly critical of neoconservatives will sit out the electoral process, thereby making the probability of Reagan-friendly candidates winning elections more likely because of smaller voter turnouts. The disillusioned will only return to the ballot box if they believe a candidate—free of the constraints of manufactured media images—can save a process that has been so irresponsibly hijacked by pretenders.

Equally pessimistic, in returning to Denzin's (1991) argument, Kokonis (2002, online) elaborates on the scene in which Truman's sailboat 'pierces through the fragile shell of [his] artificial world.' In doing so, the illusion of Truman's life is literally shattered, and he is forced to make a choice. He can accept his starring role and remain in 'The Truman Show.' Or, he can choose to continue searching for an alternative life where he is more a subject than an object of developments in the real—but completely unknown—world. He may even come to admit that Christof is right about the real world being as deceitful and manipulative, if not more so, than the world he has known throughout his life. Of course, Truman—and perhaps we as film viewers expect and are thus not surprised by the fact that he—chooses the latter: freedom. But at what cost? Unlike the previous films in this study, we might be more unsure about what will happen next to Truman because he has absolutely no reference, whatsoever, to help him comprehend, cope with, and start his new life in the real world. At least with Marty McFly in *Back to the Future*, we were given two more sequels to his story, and we can at least imagine what David and Jennifer will do in their post-Pleasantville lives, just as we can also envision how Josh in *Big* and Peggy Sue's lives will turn out. Not so with Truman.

However, there is an alternative perspective. The puzzle is deliberately left unsolved as Truman reaches the edge of his simulated world. We could choose, as intimated in the film, that things are not really as bad as they might seem, and it is okay to leave it unresolved and move on. Here, we would be content to passively accept the film's cynical critique of contemporary society at its material surface. Perhaps the most important unanswered question we should be asking must be targeted not toward Truman but to Christof—or any 'creator.' Just as in empirical

reality, the question of morality in simulations—in the era of virtual reality, computer animation, online games, and real-life television—would be concerned with the challenge of making choices consistent with what is considered to be right and good. In *The Truman Show*, the creator set the parameters of experience and, more or less, once the environment, bodies, and minds were set, he could take a relatively *laissez-faire* approach and stand in the background watching it all unfold.

Whatever happens, the creator remains primarily responsible not only for his/her own simulations, but those created within them. Christof ultimately concluded that happiness was contingent upon a specific, proper understanding of reality about oneself, and about what he envisioned as the true circumstances in the world. Otherwise, any false understanding would be temporary, and then there would be a tension, an unhappy, frustrating sense of dissonance. However, as the film unfolds, maintaining this status quo—accounting for the addictive, corrupted power of illusions—becomes especially vulnerable and untenable when the simulation (tension) has been conceived and constructed as being the ideal.

Unlike the other films studied, *The Truman Show* goes the farthest in challenging us to contemplate new ways of thinking about the 'big picture.' Pecora (2002, pp. 350-356) suggests that contemporary culture is obsessed with the practice of 'testing reality,' which speaks to the increasingly complex relationship between truth and fiction in contemporary culture. Pecora sees reality television as manifesting a compulsive need within liberal democratic societies to 'reveal the norms and limits of individual responsibility and group identity, however exaggerated (and commercialized) the settings that reveal such knowledge may be' (ibid.). The intentional blurring, Pecora concludes, invites us to participate in a 'real-time,' 'self-conscious' sociological experiment in which we are 'simultaneously ethnologists and ethnological subjects' (ibid., p. 353). So, like Truman, we can use our imaginations to suspend our disbeliefs, remove our masks, and break free from some entanglements of our institutional paradigms.

8.3 As a Media Criticism Text

Upon its release in 1998, some critics praised *The Truman Show* for its provocative perspective on media power. However, before congratulating Weir, we should

carefully consider that as a Hollywood project, it was created to be profitable as a cinematic form of entertainment, and like most films, whether or not it has a 'hidden' ideological agenda is open to debate and interpretation.[322] Still, because the film's narrative is based on the media's ability to create a false reality, *The Truman Show* well serves the role of using CDA to examine the 'power' of the media today.

As Bishop (2000, p. 7) states, citing Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony,[323] television programmes and films such as *The Truman Show* 'co-opt our enhancement (and disenchantment) with the media and sell it back to us.' Bishop further claims:

> Films like *The Truman Show* channel our discontentment with the media into what John Storey (1998, p. 124) refers to as "ideologically safe harbors." They are clear examples of the kind of ideological states apparati described by Louis Althusser,[324] used to sustain our adherence to a managed set of cultural values (ibid.).

However, Bishop also points out, and rightly so, that many viewers left *The Truman Show* 'convinced' they had 'experienced the…most insightful [film] in media criticism—the preferred reading by the film's producers' (ibid.). It is extremely ironic that the fictional audience of Truman's television show 'is portrayed as an unthinking gaggle of mentally moribund celebrity-worshippers'[325] (ibid) who seem to believe, according to Marks (2005, p. 226) 'that the unscreened life is not worth living.' Of course, casting calls for every reality television show are quickly filled on the first try.

Bishop (2000, p. 7) is not alone in his claim that the true captives are us, the movie-going audience, because we don't recognise ourselves 'in the faces of

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[322] Paramount Pictures originally intended the film to be a small budget production with the screenwriter Andrew Niccol as the director. However, Niccol wanted Weir to direct the film and had hoped the studio would cast a telegenic, extroverted actor for the main role, such as Jim Carrey, who starred in the film. Once Carrey, who commanded a $12 million salary for the film, expressed interest, the studio immediately expanded the budget to $60 million.

[323] See Joll (1977) for a detailed discussion of Gramsci's theory of hegemony.

[324] See Ferretter (2006) for a detailed discussion of Althusser's theories.

[325] See Kleiner (1998, p. 12) for an interview with screenplay writer Andrew Niccol, who states: 'I'm interested in this idea of who's the real captive—is it Truman, or is it the viewers watching Truman?'

fictional viewers peering longingly at the television screens in *Truman*—they represent the people who really let the media control their lives,' not us. This is troubling for Bishop because *The Truman Show* has been designed, 'or engineered for effect, as Foucault (1981) might argue—[as] part of the publicity for the [film],' and thus it reflects 'the control exercised by media companies over the means of intellectual production' (ibid.). The viewing public is being 'fooled' by a media-created illusion. And if we have been fooled into believing that *The Truman Show* presents a critical statement against the media, then the critics who praised the film[326] were duped as well.

However, not *all* critics were fooled. Porton (1998, p. 48), in particular, found *The Truman Show* to be a weak attempt to 'critique…our media-saturated society,' and accused the film of being 'distinguished by a sneering Hollywood elitism—an overweening contempt for the supposedly "average" consumers of television programs.' Porton's contempt for the film seems to echo Poster (1990, p. 53) who, according to Bishop (2000, p. 8), wrote that 'movies like these "diffuse the radicalism" of media criticism by "confusing" us with quasi-explorations that seem to give us credit for our insight into media effects.' It is thus important to note that even though Truman does indeed escape at the end of the film, 'the media as an institution—as part of the superstructure—remains unchallenged' (ibid.), especially since *The Truman Show* portrays just one man's quest to discover sincerity in life.

A further paradox occurs when analysing *The Truman Show* from a Marxist perspective, because our ability to interpret such a film as a media criticism text relies on, according to Grossberg (1991, p. 127), 'how and where [we] are inserted into the circuit of production and consumption.' Our ability to effectively criticise the media is also complicated by our fascination with celebrities and their celebrity lives, for as Miller (1996, 2001, online) claims, we live in a 'National Entertainment State.'[327] Bishop (2000, p.9) thus contends that taken 'in this form, our criticism can

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[326] See Garner (1999, p. 4) who called *The Truman Show* 'the definitive statement on fame versus privacy in modern society'; See Atkinson (1998, p. 146) who claimed that the film 'is one of the clearest American-made proofs that cinema is a parallel consciousness whose relationship with us is fraught with desire, ambiguity, and spite as any love affair.'

[327] Miller (1996, 2001, online) further proclaims: '[T]he true causes of those enormous ills that now dismay so many Americans: the universal sleaze and "dumbing down," the flood-tide of corporate propaganda, the terminal inanity of

easily be taken and redeployed by organizations that create the programming.'[328] That is, while it is possible for individuals and groups to criticise the media—and in many cases, this criticism seems to be taken seriously by the media superstructure— it is only allowed within a media-created framework, which thus allows it to be manipulated, repackaged, and more often than not, rendered impotent.[329]

As a result, while *The Truman Show* may actually give critics of the media a voice with which to be heard, they may become 'discouraged' because '[m]edia companies have [both] created and filled a need for a discourse—albeit limited—on media effects' (ibid.).[330] In short, media criticism has become 'too accessible' (Storey, 1998, p. 51), which results in 'devalued' attempts that are then taken, manipulated, and transformed in order to keep the public participating in 'the endorsement of media products' (Bishop, 2000, p. 10). Such media criticism allows us to engage in a 'sanctioned discourse' about the media, but it is not enough to 'empower us to explore how the media truly affects us' (ibid.). In other words, while we are allowed to criticise the media, we must still play by its rules, and popular movies like *The Truman Show* only ensure that viewers 'will continue to purchase this brand of media criticism' (ibid.).[331] This view then assumes that media-generated distractions are an unavoidable trait of modern life.

However, if Bishop is right, then it is more likely also true that we might applaud our ability to pick up on all the symbolism, media references, and product placement that is so apparent in *The Truman Show*, such as when the twins (Ron and Don Taylor) make sure that Truman stands in front of a Kaiser Free Range Chicken sign when they talk to him, or Meryl's constant plugging of products, such as the

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U.S. politics. These have arisen not from any grand decline in national character, nor from the plotting of some Hebrew cabal, but from the inevitable toxic influence of those few corporations who monopolize our culture.' But according to Bozell (1996, online), Miller's argument about a 'media monopoly' lacks proof.

[328] See Storey (1998, p. 103) who claims that for Marx, 'the various components of the superstructure…exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases determine their form.'

[329] See Lowenthal (1961, p. 106) who argued that 'whenever revolutionary tendencies show a timid head, they are mitigated and cut short by a false fulfillment of wish-dreams.'

[330] See Storey (1998, p. 106) who cites Lowenthal to explain that we are discouraged by the media from 'thinking beyond the confines of the present.'

[331] See Bishop (2000) for further discussion on media intrusiveness and hegemony, and their impact on compromising the public's perceived sense of media savvy.

new Chef's Pal, the 'dicer, grater, peeler all in one.' Surely, only media savvy viewers can recognise how they are being manipulated. Or not. Indeed, while the media may actually 'acknowledge our desire to take them to task for their performance…they will have us do so on their terms' (ibid., p. 11), telling us both what to accept and what to fear.

When Truman announces in the middle of the film, '…it's when I'm unpredictable they can't deal with it,' he is reflecting Gramsci's concept of 'shifting equilibrium' (Finnochiaro, 1995, p. 28), because as Storey (1998, p. 2) puts it, 'popular culture "is a contradictory mix of competing interests and values."' But in the end, the media criticism we see in the film is '"expressed in a form that is ultimately of financial benefit to the dominant culture"' (Storey, 1998, p. 127, quoted in Bishop, 2000, p. 12). Thus, even if *The Truman Show* leaves us feeling somewhat empowered by our enhanced awareness of media manipulation, it is a false sense of empowerment.[332]

As Truman discovers more cracks in the façade of his illusionary world, it puts more stress on the characters who are supposed to control him—namely Meryl and Marlon. And with each new discovery that Truman makes, we are able to check off another point we have discovered in the media text of the film. For example, when Truman challenges Meryl in the kitchen after the traumatic—but ultimately unsuccessful—drive out of Seahaven, Meryl screams: 'How can anyone expect me to carry on under these conditions? It's unprofessional!' This leads to Marlon gently scolding Truman for being selfish to want more than the wonderful life he has in Seahaven.

As Bishop (2000, p. 13) puts it: 'It is almost as if the film's producers are telling us that we've done enough genuine media criticism for one day; it's time for us to return to the terrain that can be discussed on their terms, even though they continually allow us to return 'to our level of media criticism.' Even when Truman does manage to escape, and rumours that he is dead start to circulate among the fictional television audience, we hear familiar, media-related expressions, such as 'The media are having a feeding frenzy with this,' and Christof tells a network

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[332] See Storey (1998, p. 127) who notes that 'the commercially provided culture of the culture industries is redefined, reshaped, and redirected in strategic acts of selective consumption and productive acts of reading and articulation, often in ways not intended or even foreseen by its producers.'

executive: 'We're getting higher ratings with this…than we've ever had.' These descriptions will be readily comprehended by an alert, intelligent media consumer.

Gramsci (1971) claims that in order to fully understand how media produced commodities—particularly Hollywood films—are used to create popular culture, we must have 'vigilance and attention to the details of the production, distribution, and consumption of culture' (Storey, 1998, pp. 85-91). However, the media—including the producers of *The Truman Show*—have effectively developed a 'means for restricting how vigilant we can be' (Bishop, 2000, p. 15). Therefore, '[w]e must not allow ourselves to be deluded into thinking that these films represent genuine media criticism' (ibid.).[333] Because *The Truman Show* mainly focuses on Truman's struggle with fame, it cannot serve as an authentic media criticism text, for it 'obscures rather than resolves' (Real, 1977, p. 202) the true impact the media has on our lives. This, therefore, leaves the film somewhat impotent in having any real say about the media's overwhelming influence on society and culture.[334]

Of course, we must keep in mind that movie-making is a business, and businesses exist to be profitable. So why on earth would movie studios 'endorse satire at their own expense? Do they poke fun at themselves because they have concluded that as a nation we are incredibly media savvy? Or is [it] simply a way to turn concern about the media into a profitable vehicle?' (Bishop, 2000, p. 16). Bishop's answer is obvious: 'self-reflexiveness sells' (ibid.). And because *The Truman Show* was such a profitable film,[335] it seems 'naïve and shortsighted to say that the media are interested in earnestly exploring their roles in our lives' (ibid.). Indeed, why should they?

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[333] Storey (1998, pp. 85-91, p. 133) further elaborates: 'They are "officially sanctioned disruptions of the social order, licensed to protect it—a safety valve." Fiske (1987, 249) might argue that a film like Truman "is a recognition of the strength and endurance of those oppositional, disruptive, popular forces." This may be so, but those forces only seem to have impact when they are watered down and made acceptable' (Bishop, 2000, p. 5).

[334] See Atkinson's (1998) review of *EDtv* (Howard, 1999), in which he states: '[H]ere's a note to all filmmakers planning on making a film that satirizes the television industry: we know [that] the media intrude[s] on our private lives. We know that they're all a bunch of money-grubbing jerks. We know that fame is a double-edged sword. If you're going to make a movie that tries to tell us these things, you need to be vicious or artistically sublime.'

[335] The film earned over $31 million its opening weekend, and over $125 million by 11 October 1998. Source: Internet Movie Database [online] Available at: http://www.imbd.com/title/tt0120382/business [Accessed 11 May 2010].

Instead, we compliment Niccol and Weir for their efforts to expose such an important issue. But in doing so, we engage in extremely limited media discourse.[336] The end result of *The Truman Show*, at least as far as Bishop is concerned, is to make it 'officially cool to bash the media' through the 'accepted means of exploring the media' (p. 17)—that is, through Hollywood-produced films. *The Truman Show* apparently tells us that we are all affected by the media, even though there are people who do not allow themselves to be manipulated by it—people who are able to 'disconnect.' Therefore, Bishop claims that the film is incomplete as a media-criticism text. Instead, it only perpetuates conformity to and acceptance of the media.

As compelling as Bishop's analysis seems, it ignores the film's timing in one critical fault: we become aware of the manipulation early on in the film, so then the narrative structure turns to how and when Truman will learn to overcome these delusions. Had the truth come out at the climax, or at a much later point in the film, Bishop's analysis would appear more relevant. In other words, timing affects the strength and the direction in which self-imposed delusions win out, especially in a culture which prefers palatable conclusions where reason trumps imagination. In the case of *A Beautiful Mind* (Howard, 2001), for example, we are manipulated along with the film's protagonist John Nash (Russell Crowe), into believing a simulated reality that is disproven at the film's midway point. The remainder of the film focuses on Nash overcoming his delusions, so the ending leaves us in a much safer, more comfortable position than in Weir's open-ended story. We could argue about the merits of Truman finding ironic hopefulness at the end of the film, but there is no doubt Weir leaves that possibility intact.

Just as we articulate the philosophical critique of artificial, manipulated, and simulated realities, there is also a need to subject the ideological positions of the critical theorist to similar scrutiny. One of the earliest critiques of the potential effects of television and advertising came in the form of *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1955), a satirical novel written under a pseudonym (Hunt Collins) by Evan Hunter,

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[336] Bishop (2000, p. 17) asks us to realise that '[f]ilms like Truman normalize media influence, and at the same time cheapen and deflect attempts to truly study it. They put moviemakers in the position of leadership with regard to media criticism. Along the way, they colonize popular consciousness, using our limited knowledge of media processes. These movies essentially say to us, "You know about product placement and trashy talk shows—aren't you special? You're a savvy media consumer!" Media awareness becomes a brand.'

who also was an extremely prolific screenplay writer for film and television, specialising in crime fiction. The novel was expanded and reworked from the novella, "Malice in Wonderland' (Hunter, E., 1954), which appeared a year earlier in *If*, a San Francisco literary magazine.

The story is set in the near future (then sometime after the middle 1950s) where a consumerist United States is paralysed by a fight for political domination by two groups: 'the Vikes' (a bastardised form of 'vicarious' or 'vicarion') whose power is vested in media, advertising, and entertainment, and the 'Reels' (a bastardised form of 'realist') comprising civil servants, workers, and industrialists who are committed to 'real experience,' and forsake all media entertainment except for traditional literature and theatre, which is censored of any lewd or erotic content. Collins paints a vividly lurid society where the 'Vikes' depend entirely upon vicarious experience—eating in public is taboo as is all forms of sexual intercourse. 'Vikes' fulfill their sexual needs through entertainment known as 'sensos' and 'feelies,' which deliver mainly pornographic entertainment. Alienated from nature and sterile, the 'Vikes' do not procreate.

However, just as Collins subjects the 'Vikes' to this curiously ironic set of circumstances, the 'Reels' suffer from their own set of double standards. Several question the rationale behind censorship (that 'books and movies were causing the widespread use of narcotics [and] that the delinquency bred and nurtured in our city schools was a result of the printed word'). The 'Reels' picket films with sexual content but cheat on their spouses; they reject stimulation from books and films while '[propagating] like rabbits.' Inevitably, both factions are guilty of the denial of reality: 'We denied what was by refusing to permit representation of it, while secretly admitting it existed. The "Vikes" denied what was by allowing the representation to replace the reality' (Collins, H., 1955, p. 103). The 'Reels' win and strip away the drugs and entertainment of the 'Vikes.' The novel's protagonist—a former 'Vike'—is healed by his newfound sense of reality and falls in love.

The novel ends with the protagonist bringing a new sensory technology—that records a person's entire input of sensory data—to the president (a 'Reel') in the hopes of convincing him that its purpose is for 'real entertainment,' thus providing an outlet for reconciling the competing puritanical and hedonist positions. Like *The Truman Show*, Collins' novel is inconclusive as well. The notion of a free art—

totally liberated so that each individual can exercise his or her own 'creator-like' power—does not appear in the novel. Likewise, the pragmatic middle-of-the-road compromise for 'entertainment' is not distinguished nor contrasted with alternative ideals or ideological/philosophical notions about the goals and objectives in the text productions of fiction.

Despite the critiques, particularly those such as Bishop's, we can still view *The Truman Show* as a metaphor for today's media landscape, which increasingly utilises 'theatrical illusions' in its efforts to create more 'realistic' films, television shows, and advertisements. We can even compare Truman's initial fear of leaving Seahaven with the public's reluctance to genuinely challenge, let alone escape, its symbiotic relationship with the media that has become so deeply entrenched in today's so-called 'global community.' Many of us are highly suspicious, like Truman, of the fabricated illusions of 'reality' that are beamed to our television sets and projected on our theatre screens. In turn, we should debate the issue of the media trying to keep us immersed in their falsehoods, and rewarding us for not questioning and/or trying to reform it.

Bishop may have overstated his case. Perhaps *The Truman Show* leaves us with the realisation—or maybe just an increased awareness—that if we want to be free of the media's omnipotent grip, then we simply must make a conscious effort to distance ourselves from it. Certainly, *The Truman Show* at least contributes to increasing our awareness of fabricated media illusions that permeate popular culture.[337] Still, there is no escaping the fact that *The Truman Show* is a movie, and whether or not it offers a genuine critique of the media or is simply contrived, it conveys these ideas to us in a dramatic narrative form meant to entertain. If it didn't, no one would bother to watch the film.

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[337] See Young (1999, online) who claims that *The Truman Show* 'might seem a pointless exercise in the age of digital media, its anti-TV message a voice that barely rises above a whisper in the din of global telecom and its decidedly uncinematic agendas of interactivity (versus voyeuristic classical spectatorship), collective engagement (versus spectator individuation), and information consumption (versus narrative consumption)…[i]t is this very appearance of pointlessness…that requires us to take a closer look at the long list of mediaphobic films produced in Hollywood.' Indeed, according to Young: 'Hollywood film has few options left to it for self-definition in the present, save the negative lessons of mediaphobic films' (ibid.).

It is clearly a well-made film, but the real question is what do we take away from it? Is it purely 'mind candy,' or can we recognise that because it is so easy to identify with Truman, perhaps we should try to maintain a more critical distance from the media, and at least become more aware and critical of how it affects us, rather than blindly allowing the media to use us? After all, it is us—the viewing/listening/reading public—that makes the media possible. And yes, many of us can surely relate to the fictional characters and audience in the film who seem to hang on Truman's every move and utterance. Our willingness to accept the exploitation of Truman's life in the name of 'entertainment' is evidenced in today's more-than-ample supply of reality and news-based television programmes.

8.4 Conclusion

Of the six films examined in this study, *The Truman Show* extends its postmodern, existential arm the furthest, going far beyond the well-trodden thematic paths of the intermingling of life and art, and deep into questions of free will and unencumbered choice. Once Truman discovers the truth, director Christof can't believe that Truman would want to choose the experience of painful dilemmas. Truman also misreads his own circumstances, thinking that he can become readily and effortlessly spontaneous. The supporting cast of capitalists—who, incidentally, look exceedingly bad in this film—have created for Truman a false sense of spontaneity in which they make sure he makes the 'right' decisions, not his own idiosyncratic choices. They accomplish this through a totally controlled, totalitarian, and predictable environment, reducing the possible field of decisions to just one. Thus, Truman's world is thoroughly limited and constrained, but the range of actions from which he can choose is not.

Like Truman, Reagan in a way was not 'real,' and his handlers boldly reengineered and exhaustively rendered ideas and stories from previous generations that became murky at best and threatening at worst. Down to his presidential portraits complete with the Hollywood-style edge lighting, the airbrushed teeth and hair, and the mesmerisingly romantic backgrounds cast by the use of scrims, Reagan epitomised the insincerity of the American political enterprise. Like Truman, Reagan

did not represent an idea marked off in quotation marks, but the punctuation marks themselves.

But while Reagan would never have even entertained the notion of abandoning the enterprise, Truman decides to walk out on the project, and we could argue that this is an immoral decision because it stands to wipe out the investment and employment of countless numbers of actors, directors, manipulators, and others. Truman's decision is then framed only within the narrow frame of his particular interests. But of course, Truman did not ask for, nor opted to be in, this situation. There was no consultation or act of choosing allowed to him for accepting this responsibility. How can he therefore be held responsible if he did not choose that path? In addition, Truman is justified in thinking that he had been wronged by all of the people around him. Truman's circumstances beg the larger question for all of us: Are we morally responsible and accountable for the well-being of even those who have wronged us?

The Truman Show is a defining candidate for the postmodern territory of exploration as many critics have demonstrated. As adults, we can become acutely vulnerable as the manipulated victims—either voluntarily, inadvertently, deliberately, unknowingly, or by necessity for survival—of the decisions of corrupt politicians, scientists, self-absorbed media tycoons, adrenaline-driven generals, poorly trained professionals in business and education, and egotistic artists. This world is not ours to be made, and our ability to shape and influence it is extraordinarily limited and starkly illusionary, according to many critics. Many have resigned themselves to live in their own 'The Truman Show,' but is it really inescapable or intractable? But does this mean that we are not morally responsible for others? This is a question that begs a longer and broader historical frame of analysis than what many critics are willing to deploy.

More recently, it becomes instructive that accepting a vigorous and extensive mainstream push for a fantasy frame about what the Reagan legacy meant equates to surrendering to one of the group's most successful strategies. That is, affecting innocence about the harmful and oppressive consequences of their own ideology in an age challenged by the unprecedented election of the nation's first black president, thereby helping Reaganesque conservatism, as an ideology, survive to emerge and fight another day.

However, even the fatalistic elements suggested in the film signal that the incoherent paradoxes of Reaganism could never be fully obscured or sanitised. Utopianism cannot be mimicked or faked and, as demonstrated by Christof's idyllic simulation, the inevitable breach will occur as someone within the simulation (i.e. Truman) successfully suspends his disbelief within the macrocosm that requires such a suspension of disbelief. But, unlike any of the previous films, the attack on capitalism in *The Truman Show* is brutalising. Exploitation occurs without any sense of remorse, and every individual is going after his or her own self-interests against the backdrop of a society that disintegrates without any hope of reverse. Christof warns Truman, but the newly enlightened man makes the choice nevertheless. He goes into the dark rather than stay in the once-organised utopia.

And while the film was released ten years after the end of the Reagan presidency, it says less about the president—or any elected president for that matter—and more about a national society's character that comfortably permits its elected officials to become projections of a particular, fictional, self-image. Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, in his (2007a) biography of Amerigo Vespucci, characterised the 15th century explorer for whom the New World was named as a 'makeover artist.' The author documented numerous events in which Vespucci reinvented himself in the face of personal, commercial, and economic failure. The man took various turns not only as an explorer, but also a factotum, pearl dealer, merchant's agent, and self-proclaimed cosmographer. Fernandez-Armesto concluded that the nation aptly named (i.e. The United States is the only country which calls itself 'America'), was the prototype for the familiar and typical American story. That is, 'of life, at least, in the United States, which has become the land of self-reinvention, or makeover, of celebrity rehab, of flexi-careers and flexi-lives' (Fernandez-Armesto, 2007b, online).

In some respects, then, Baudrillard's pronouncements about the deletion of large chunks of the referential universe seem plausible, as do Bishop's concerns that Hollywood image-makers in the guise of film directors and writers might play out their potentially fetishistic tendencies as they manipulate every character, frame, and element in a cinematic story. Nevertheless, this cannot yet satisfactorily explain why many audience members will arrive at their own comfortable interpretation of understanding why the protagonist did what he did, and what transpired in the plot.

Of the key protagonists in the six films studied, Truman comes closest to being a true postmodern character. However, as complex as his existential archetype appears to be, Truman would still pale considerably against contemporary postmodern cinematic characters, especially *Donnie Darko* (Kelly, 2001), a film that is definitely less concerned with questions about social structures than it is about identity. In the film, we have plenty of answers to consider when the story asks us where or who the protagonist is (e.g., the note on the refrigerator with 'Where is Donnie?' scrawled on it, which appears in the film's beginning). Unlike with Truman, we do not have the benefit of structure to determine the answer to the identity question but, of course, the meaning of any potential answer is legitimately open for debate within any of these films' plotlines. *The Truman Show* is perhaps the strongest postmodern example of the six films we have explored that sufficiently bridges the gap between viewers to satisfy both the elites and those who challenge, breach, and break through the seams of an artificially constructed world. It provides a useful baseline for discerning in specific and comprehensive ways how contemporary American cinema sustains and subverts the ever-resilient tropes of Reaganism that have so slyly blurred the lines of entertainment, performance artist, and political leader.

Conclusion

In their most effective form, fantasy films go beyond challenging and subverting established power structures to reimagining our embodied existence. Aspects of Fairclough's conceptualisation of 'semantic engineering' are useful in analysing the discursive structures within these American fantasy films as multi-semiotic artifacts, especially for gaining an understanding of why, for some Americans, they believe the nation in which they grew up is fading, and why they are looking for real and imagined champions who are willing heroes to fight for a country they remember fondly. However, while the films do sustain an emotional connection for a lost sense of what the nation was imagined to have been in the 1950s and 1960s, especially for white conservatives and even some progressives who supported Reagan's articulated vision for a 'new America,' they also incorporate an awakened sense of spiritual reality that rebels against the fabricated borders and conceits of political discourses.

This analysis brings forward subtexts in the cinematic corpus of this study that from different points of view—regardless of whether they are conservative or progressive—ask just what there was to miss about the country in which Reagan and even other generations of his supporters experienced during their formative years. In this sense, each of the six films explored in this study contain subtexts that open up alternative ways to the ongoing celebration of key concepts and leitmotifs of Reaganism inside and outside of contemporary Republican circles in the U.S. In particular, the subtexts suggest to us that women, blacks, Jews, Muslims, and other racial and ethnic minorities—increasingly prominent in the contemporary American demographic profile—do not express similar emotional and nostalgic sentiments. And even for conservative and progressive Reagan supporters, their nostalgic memories are challenged by subtexts of global threats of nuclear war and economic forces that reshape long-standing perceptions of what it means to sustain family and community. In the following section, these subtexts are explored first in an overall summary, and then in detail relevant to each of the six films studied.

The evaluation of these subtexts is of major importance, particularly as the American nation marked the centenary of Reagan's birth in 2011, an event coordinated by a national commission that almost certainly has completed the late president's historical canonisation in the public's mind. More than twenty years

since Reagan left office, and seven years since his death, disciples, acolytes, converted political leaders, historians, and writers have successfully warped the national imagination about the president's actual record during his eight-year administration. The efforts to inculcate an intense sense of nostalgia for the man have continued to pay handsomely for those preserving the Reagan myth to their own political gains. For example, in the first debate of the 2008 presidential primary campaign for Republican candidates, Reagan's name was invoked 53 times while few bothered to mention the sitting president at the time (George W. Bush).[338]

Because of their significant durability and popularity, Reagan and Reaganism have been transformed into avatars in a world where the technology of virtual reality can make it increasingly difficult for some people to distinguish between the real and imagined likes and dislikes, between our earnest and fantasised hopes and fears, and between our pragmatic and idealised perceptions of our social interactions and relationships. It then should surprise no one just how entrenched the Reagan legacy has become in 21st Century America, even to the point where pundits, media professionals, and the larger public repeatedly compare and contrast the words and performance of the nation's first black president, Barack Obama, with his famously storied predecessor.

On the surface, these fantasy films have proven to be enormously entertaining and popular as escapism. However, they also intrigue for their potential to use artistic expression to enlighten humanity and to demystify the undercurrents of social and ideological hegemonies, which constantly emerge, shift, transform, and reconstitute themselves at different points of history. The debate about Hollywood's role in shaping the minds and thoughts of its audiences remains fierce and inconclusive. Critics on both sides of the main political and ideological aisles often go to the red-state/blue-state dichotomy to categorise the film industry's political and social affirmations. However, in acknowledging that all six films presented in this study succeeded with strong box-office results, it would be more appropriate to tag Hollywood as unquestionably green, and not in the environmental sense.

Hollywood's intrinsic competitive advantage resides in its capacity to orchestrate a slyly nuanced dance of mystification and demystification. Hollywood's most successful films, even as they perpetuate the most familiar myths of our social

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[338] See Wolfers (2008, online).

and cultural industries, also reflect mainstream audience values that reflect likewise the values and perceived self-images of those in the business of producing the cinematic myth. Hollywood undoubtedly understood the implications of Reagan's success in orchestrating his own sly and subtle political dance of mystification and demystification. After the 1970s, where dark, depressing, deeply flawed antiheroes dominated unapologetically raw, turbulent cinematic narratives opposing the status quo and societal conventions,[339] the emergence of charming, likeable, ordinary individuals as hesitant heroes in fantastical settings in the 1980s coincided with Reagan's memorably sunny presence on the national scene.

Elements of wishful thinking, augured by selective memory by intense feelings of nostalgia, and a particular fondness for the 1950s as an imagined sense of order, family, stability, and widespread prosperity are prominent throughout the six films. They are indeed so strong that, on first review, the films seemingly endorse the bland conformity of that earlier decade and of the storied precepts of a nation's technological prowess, economic prosperity, and fabled moral-social integrity along with the nostalgic yearning for benevolent, virile, patriarchal figures who embody Reaganesque traits of unconditional and unfailing loyalty. While many critics rightly examine the many elements in these films that appear to reinforce in popular entertainment frames the fundamental message points underlying Reaganism, we can even go further into some of the more nuanced and subtle manifestations of these narratives to suggest that characters and plot lines serve to reveal quite slyly the inherent and irreconcilable incoherence of the sociopolitical and sociocultural tenets of Reaganism.

There is a substantial underlying irony contained within these popular representations of escapism and fantasy, which contemporary criticism has largely ignored. Both inadvertently and deliberately, the films serve to remind us that, in the quest for our meaningful history, we must transcend the temptation to go back merely to a conveniently accessible age that masks our collective sociopolitical imagination against the actual record of oppression, discrimination, and censorship responsible for our problems in the first place. The subtexts, therefore, can stimulate and prime our sense for embarking upon our own study (and re-discovery) of history.

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[339] See Friedman (2007).

Depending on one's partisan and national views, for better or worse, Reagan's most significant contributions were psychological and the films of this study, taken as a complete set, reflect the sharp contrasts that have become entrenched in contemporary American society. In *Back to the Future*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, and *The Family Man*, for example, the films parallel a Reaganesque reawakening of the American faith in common sense and the charming, reassuring values of homespun nostalgic narratives. With *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show*, for example, there are distinct underlying echoes of concern about intellectual laziness and the ways in which melodramatic sentimentality minimises actual conflicts and animosities that intrude upon those escapist fantasies of the past. In the character-driven narrative of *Big*, the positive and negative psychological elements discussed here find a precarious balance within the reluctant hero of an innocent boy/unorthodox toy executive.

Going yet deeper, there is the fatalistic realisation, strongest in *Peggy Sue Got Married* and to a lesser yet still prominent degree in *Back to the Future* and *Pleasantville*, that in order to achieve anything approaching the Reaganesque vision of the American Dream likely requires individuals to settle for mediocrity and lowered expectations when it comes to a stable family and independent career-driven wealth. The Reagan promise is predicated on such wishful thinking that the dual towers of problem-free family love and hard-driven economic success could never be made compatible without risking significant sacrifice in either realm of pursuit. Only in *Big* do we see the strongest indications of potentially understanding just how incompatible these tenets of domestic politics really are. Meanwhile, the fatalistic impulses are conspicuously absent in *The Family Man* because the conclusion suggests that one conceivably could have it all but only in a tightly controlled world of consciousness, where every sign or manifestation of social inequality and economic disappointment arising from the impact of Reagan's legacy has been scrubbed thoroughly from the main character's imagination. On the other hand, in *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show*, we are drawn to riveting stories asking us to consider the risks and costs of illusively soothing palliatives that, in effect, stand to rob individuals of their civil liberties and genuine quest for economic independence.

Examining these cinematic representations of popular culture leads to insights about the contemporary sociopolitical situation at the time of a particular film's production and release. Furthermore, the diagnostic assessment can plumb the larger strengths and weaknesses of contentious political forces as well as prevailing concerns and desires of the broader community.

There is little doubt that *Back to the Future*, as a blockbuster cinematic artifact, which achieved spectacular financial and marketing success at its 1985 release, reaffirmed, to a large extent, the material reality of the American system, as examined in great detail by many critics. The film, in portraying clearly marked conflicts between good and bad, functions effectively as a fantasy, both literally and symbolically, in giving the protagonists an option to rebel against prevailing social and political forces.

Tampering with the past, indeed, can be quite dangerous—but I have taken the existing analysis further to explain why it is equally risky and injurious to stand idly at the side. Sure, Marty awakens at the end back in his familiar home surrounded by new furniture, loving and motivated parents, attractive siblings, and other objects of newfound affluence—all seemingly hewing to the symbolic language of Reagan's most popular and frequently quoted speeches. Of course, the film is missing the open-ended 'beautiful anarchy,' where the individual refuses to lose himself to an imposed reality that sanitises the genealogy of the actions, words, and events in one's historical memory. And, in many respects, like Reagan, Marty reminds us that preserving the illusion of affluence requires the past to remain buried. However, Marty's struggle throughout the film also confirms why—despite the most earnest attentions of those who strive to protect their legacies—the dust never really settles on the past, and why we should cultivate our own sense of judgment to discover our history on our own terms.

In many ways, *Peggy Sue Got Married* also reaffirms the material realities of the American system, particularly religious faith, obedience to parents and superiors, the Puritan work ethic, optimistic perceptions about careers and upward mobility, and abstinence from premarital sex. McCreadie (1990), Levy (1991), and Wood (2003) have correctly situated the film as a classic conservative statement of these Reaganesque values, which serve to resurrect the status quo of a stable family life that was more evident in the public sphere before the liberation movements for

sexual and women's rights challenged traditional notions of the nuclear family unit. Of the six films studied, *Peggy Sue Got Married* stands out as the weakest fantasy film in terms of teasing out a subversive text that challenges social conformity and assimilation. Clearly, the plot climax in the film legitimises conservative social institutions as Peggy Sue maneuvers through the convenient and simplistic narrative device, skipping over the social and cultural revolutions that undoubtedly would have compelled her to question if, indeed, she was deciding a future with her best innate interests in mind.

However, the prevailing analysis can be extended. On the surface, at least, the film gratifies a broadly defined audience willing to accept a nostalgic depiction of a time as believable yet uncomplicated entertainment. On the other hand, because the film skips over so much social, economic, and cultural territory, which surely anyone would have been confronted with had he or she been in Peggy Sue's circumstances, one wonders if the best to be hoped for in a world influenced by Reaganesque ideals about family and capitalism amounts to settling for a lot less life-sustaining value. The subversive deconstruction of Reaganism may not be readily apparent, but it becomes evident as the film is viewed a quarter of a century after its release.

The Family Man, the most recently produced film of the six studied, yet with a story that begins during the heart of the Reagan era, synthesises the major thematic elements of *Back to the Future*, *Big*, and *Peggy Sue Got Married* into the archetype of the earnest, innocent, middle-class white suburban head of household who seeks to bridge historical and alternative realities and find success in business and love. As many critics have summarised, *The Family Man* echoes the pervasive branding of America in the age of Reagan: the simple, boldly optimistic aesthetic image of a nation and its citizens comfortable in its homes and families; complex problems of society and economy that can be resolved primarily by stimulating consumer desire and healthy market competition; a government which can manufacture consent even where no consensus exists merely by promoting the production and selling of more goods, regardless of costs to the environment and the people, and the paradoxical sentiments for progress and nostalgia that can be reconciled without thought or tradeoffs.

Yet more so than any of the other six films, as suggested by some scholars, *The Family Man* emerges also as a criticism of a racially charged hegemonic discourse that can be traced back to the Reagan legacy. With casting Cash as a black angel, the black character stands in the film separate from a discourse of discontentment that was extensively fanned by the parade of quips, anecdotes, metaphors, and casually cited statistics uttered by Reagan before and after his 1980 election. For example, during his first (1976) presidential campaign, Reagan made reference to a 'welfare queen' from Chicago's South Side. It remains a pejorative, stigmatising label for recidivist poor mothers—often black single mothers. Despite the fact that American women can no longer remain on welfare indefinitely, the term continues to reflect many American's views on poverty and the welfare system.

In taking the analysis further, I have lengthened the window of observation to establish a more detailed historical context that shows why Reagan's pronouncements were not cohesive with his otherwise innocently declared intentions. With Reagan, this was not an anomaly. At various times, he declared the Voting Rights Act as 'humiliating' to Southern segregationists,[340] tried to intervene unsuccessfully on behalf of a private religious university that risked losing its tax-exempt status because of a ban on interracial dating,[341] and fired three members of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission because of protests from southern whites.[342] At other times, he seemed so benignly detached from racial issues or debates that one would be hard pressed to level criticisms against him as being racially insensitive.

In the film, Jack, the rehabilitated 'family man'—like Reagan—seems unaware that his words could be profoundly offensive. All of this has been cinematically decontextualised and excised from the historical causes and consequences of racism in America. And Cash's role in the film demonstrates precisely just how that detachment is as potentially injurious as outright racially denigrating utterances. Cash serves as the film's therapeutic channel to rehabilitate the protagonist as a 'family man,' but while Cash's positive performance eases some of the white guilt, the racial hegemony remains largely intact. *The Family Man*, therefore, comes through as a racially charged text because it mirrors the real blind

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[340] See Williams (2004, online).
[341] See Albrecht (1982, online).
[342] See Macivor (2009, online).

spot that has allowed us to take comfort in the illusion of a clear understanding of the history of those inequalities.

And, unlike *Pleasantville*, *The Family Man* also eludes any of the other divisive elements in the culture wars that went well beyond racial questions, but nevertheless carried a major impact with racial and ethnic minorities during and after the Reagan presidency. The racial division happened to be sharpened as a result of the president's positions on HIV/AIDS research funding, legalising prayer in schools, curtailing affirmative action initiatives, banning abortions and limiting funding as well as access to birth control and planned parenthood programmes. Reagan succeeded best at changing the trajectory in the political discourse, creating an odd yet deeply disturbing nostalgic sense for a lingering limbo period in racial and ethnic relations where the most relevant players could be excluded.

Even the 2010 national elections revealed how embedded that Reagan-influenced trajectory remains, especially as the nation still was wrestling with the lingering effects of a deep recession that began before Obama's administration. In a troubled economy, the strongest chorus of disapproval came from particularly older, more conservative, and less educated white voters in regions such as the Midwest and South, which have suburban, family-oriented communities much like those nostalgically celebrated in *The Family Man*, *Pleasantville*, *Big*, *Back to the Future*, and *Peggy Sue Got Married*. And hardly is a case being made for any redistributive economic policies that would run counter to what Reaganism—and the story line of most of these films—suggest.

However, the incompatibilities of Reaganism on the dual fronts of stable family values and unabashed corporate capitalism become more evident as *Big* traverses farther along the continuum of fantasy film than *Back to the Future*. It succeeds, especially in shading the seemingly escapist tale with a slyly manipulated storyline that functions separately and simultaneously as pro-Reagan and anti-Reagan texts. While *Back to the Future* and *Peggy Sue Got Married* were released during periods when Reagan's favorable poll numbers were at their highest levels, *Big*'s 1988 release came near the end of Reagan's presidency, so the film can comfortably begin to puncture small holes in the popularised imagination that fueled the man's public appeal. The film certainly enforces the conventional wisdom of social conformity and proper behaviour as Josh returns to his place as a normal 13-

year-old boy, a tacit endorsement of the Reagan vision for a happy, stable America. The film also neatly skirts away from any moral questions when Josh, transformed as an adult, lied in order to be hired at the MacMillan Toy Company, which prospers as a result of his decisions.

Somewhat ironically, Reagan's most loyal adherents crafted their own historical fictions to sell Americans a youthful image of an America that just happened to be led by the oldest man ever elected president. Despite his age, Reagan's public appearance often conjured up images of boy-like playfulness and humour. This sly reinvention is important here. Critics such as Register (2001: 314) explained how '*Big*'s success story directly equates aging with corruption, weakness, and bad business sense; youth, on the other hand, means innocence, energy, and marketing genius.' Indeed, Josh's innocence is preserved along with a type of popular cynicism and disaffection of which could only be reconciled by a simple grandfather figure whom could safely communicate unrealistic and unfulfillable idealistic expectations to a younger audience that likely had yet to develop any illusions about the establishment and the institutions necessary to sustain it.

Despite its obvious escapist feature assets, I contend that *Big* comes much closer to the 'beautiful anarchy' than period contemporary films such as *Back to the Future* and *Peggy Sue Got Married*. Unlike the other protagonists, Josh does not experience time travel and he yearns for a past that never really existed at all. No longer are we compelled to think of the 1950s or any other period as the default nostalgic reference point. However, we are asked to honor Gagnon's (1988) challenge of taking up our own study of history and making our own judgments. The paradox of Reaganism is that as simple and as innocent as the dream might have seemed in the 1980s—when it was articulated by the man himself—it also served as the pretext for a painfully long and damaging marriage of political convenience that would fuel the power ambitions of neoconservatives long after Reagan left the White House. *Big*, as tender and funny as possible on its surface, nevertheless shows the flimsiness of those dreams, and a cynical yet subtle lesson that each of us is responsible for finding our own ways out of disappointment, disillusionment, and disengagement.

Even despite the widespread popularity of Reaganism, few were willing to venture that the political and ideological hegemony fostered during the 1980s could

successfully avoid being vigorously contested and renegotiated in the complex discursive environments of American society. On a broader scale, *Big* suggests that we would benefit from fine tuning our comprehensive perceptive capacity to anticipate particular trends and to distill the strengths, vulnerabilities, and limitations of mainstream political, social, and ideological pulses that resonate most clearly in the current moments. If we accept the inevitably shaky prospects of political and ideological movements withstanding even temporary overthrow and reversal, then we become better equipped to address more satisfactorily and substantively our individual and collective hopes, desires, and fears.

The critique destabilising Reagan is sharpened considerably in *Pleasantville*. Here, the mythologised Reagan legacy frames the fantastical tale of culture wars in a newly coloured landscape that plays with stunningly familiar reality in ongoing political debates about gay marriage, uncensored literature, artistic expression, abortion, immigration rights, universal health care, religious tolerance, and the relevance of scientific inquiry in evolution and climate change. It is not Reagan per se, as many critics argue, but instead the hijacked image of the president that has become the lightning rod for neoconservatives to express their anger toward their liberal and progressive political opponents.

Pleasantville goes farther in along the continuum of fantasy film than *Back to the Future* and *Peggy Sue Got Married* in challenging us to think about the ramifications of the culture wars, which continue to be inflamed. Likewise, the clashes portrayed in the film echo the current climate of widespread disagreement with the postmodern phenomenon of prominent wedge issues, such as gay marriage and immigration reform. Also, it echoes a lack of popular support, especially among younger generations, for the brand of Reaganism that actually has propelled national politics for much of the nation's existence. The film becomes a proxy for a clash of pro-Reagan and anti-Reagan sentiments. And, in the presence of the nation's first truly miscegenated president, the prospects for a multicultural, multiracial, pluralistic society with tolerance as its universal civic virtue are being vehemently contested by mainstream conservatives who see the unflattering facts of Reagan's legacy as irrelevant in their quest to sustain the generational partisan chain of nostalgic beliefs.

Pleasantville most effectively subverts Reaganism for how it symbolises, quite convincingly, the difficulties of altering entrenched partisanship even when

major transformative events such as economic recessions, wars, and significant shifts in a political party's electoral fortunes occur. Citizens are motivated to follow a particular party, political movement, or social group based on their views and values, and the group's capacity to promote and secure individual interests. However, just as strong—and which the film's dramatic tension indicates so broadly—is the individual's self-identification compared to mental images, stereotypes, and third-person perceptions of those who belong to opposing parties or groups.

These differences apparently are becoming far more defined, particularly as some of the nation's suburban communities rapidly expand as refuges from urban centers where much of the population growth is coming from diverse racial and ethnic groups, and where the bulk of political power, sway, and access once had been centered. Partisan Democrats and similarly labeled liberals will side with others who self-identify in the same ways, and they will not identify with conservative or Republican partisans because they represent the opposition and obstacles to their views based on sociocultural and psychological images and vice versa. The homogenising, separatist pulse of these sprouting suburban enclaves means people will undoubtedly embed themselves where their ideology and views fit within the matrix of social groups and political debate, or where 'Codes of Conduct' leave no ambiguities about black and white. There is no room for colours, hues, and tints. And, as demonstrated in *Pleasantville*, even if the competition over the partisan divide remains unchecked with two American groups drifting further apart—despite changes in leadership or policy reform within our governing systems—the two groups inevitably will collide in the near future.

Pleasantville, particularly in how it portrays the conventions of storytelling entertainment in the 1950s as well as the 1990s, reveals just how deeply embedded our identity constructions really are. No question they are fictions, but they are enormously important and essential politically, socially, and culturally and, as the film's storyline suggests, some would risk their lives rather than give up their identities. The film's ingenious use of colour amplifies this theme and extends it to the notion of racial identity as a fiction. The profoundly deep monochromatic fictitious structures of white identity remain impervious to the surface changes of racial relations in society. Unless we are willing to confront the sociocultural and socio-psychological undercurrents of racism and the idealised fictions of a white ego

persona, *Pleasantville* reminds us that permanent and meaningful changes in our society's racial relations will probably never be realised.

Finally, the critique of the Reagan legacy-building project as full-blown political theatre completes the circle in *The Truman Show*. Of the six films studied, *The Truman Show* is the strongest example of the cultural and ethical engineering enterprise as described by Fairclough (1995a), in which discursive practices become so normalised as to appear sensible and pragmatic, even if their factual basis can be challenged and proven otherwise. Truman's fantastical tale vividly replicates the decades-long branding project of Reagan—an intricately orchestrated mash-up of stagecraft and statecraft, or media and mimesis, of cultural symbols and corporate branding that put the former Hollywood actor into the role of a lifetime. Christof constructs the fictional Truman enterprise, just like Reagan's aides had arranged a dream-worthy production number to formally launch the president's reelection campaign. Reagan's experience with political theatre was not an historical exception, but he proved exceptionally adept at reaping the advantages of his rise to political power. Much of the above certainly has been echoed with numerous variations by many critics.

However, as with the other films, a further exploration of larger historical trends is important in teasing out the deeper and potentially more subversive roots in the film's structure that threaten to upend any sustainable and intelligible sense of the legitimacy of a Reagan doctrine. In the preceding half-century before 1980, the liberal legacies of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy dominated the political landscape. The first actor to assume the U.S. presidency, Reagan's impeccable sense of timing had upended decades-long conventional political perceptions which championed that government oversight was necessary to keep capitalistic corporate interests in check. A wealthy, self-made man, he was visibly more comfortable chatting with a ranch worker or a neighbourhood cop than with a 'liberal' policy expert or lawyer with elite university credentials. Smiling and full of 'aw shucks' charm, Reagan was seen as someone who could go head-to-head more effectively than a veteran Washington politico with the leader of the then-Soviet Union or the rogue dictator of a Third World nation. On the other hand, once the force of his personality was no longer a constant on the nation's political stage, the new political hegemony engendered by Reaganism gave way rather quickly to the

tempered centrist conservatism of his immediate successor (George H. W. Bush) and, later, to the center-left liberalism of William J. Clinton. Not even a Christof-like figure can gain secure enough control over the constantly recurring vigorous contests of ideological hegemonies that mark contemporary American society.

Given how the six films in this study tout, in general, the positive aspirations of a well-heeled, middle-class suburban life with access to the products and symbols of material success and affluence, these concerns carry over into larger questions of the fantastical aspects in official portrayals of economically stable life. Clearly, the recent recession proved how vulnerable the comfortably well off suburban family really is, despite the optimistic portrayals presented in ads, films, and television series. More so, in terms of the political economy, the suburban family likely is much closer to the circumstances of the working class family. Many mainstream Hollywood films scrub away harsh realities that might unsettle and disturb suburban consumers who take comfort in the well-appointed trappings of their lives. Often, only in films made by an independent director or a cinematic documentary producer that are released in much more limited distribution, do these realities take on eye-opening awareness, especially in narratives frequently reflecting classic standards of investigative journalism. Generally factually blunt and realistically gritty and raw, these films potentially provide the comparative baseline against the commodified mainstream approaches in the sort of blockbuster fantasy-driven films like those analysed here.

These films provide among the most compelling snapshots of the most prominent and accessible psychological, political, social, and ideological currents of the time in which they were made. However, they also become vehicles for anticipating shifts that potentially rattle and even reverse previously solid hegemonic ideologies. For example, when *Peggy Sue Got Married* was released in 1986, Reagan spoke frequently on the issue of traditional marriage. The film plainly suggests that marriage with a stable, happy relationship in hand can be an effective panacea to socioeconomic dilemmas, conflicts, and problems. However, the Hollywood treatment of marriage in the film is situated exclusively in the secular—not the religious—realm, which amplifies its appeal to as broad a demographically-driven audience as possible.

While the issue of gay marriages had yet to emerge on the public's radar in 1986—much less the widespread acceptance of equal rights and protection for gays and lesbians—the affirmation of marriage in *Peggy Sue Got Married* also upends rather surprisingly the ideological foundations of those, today, who oppose marriage equality. The debate has been conducted with the same evangelical and conservative zeal ignited during the heyday of the Reagan years by Christians, many of whom became solid Republicans with the former actor's election. If indeed capitalism thrives upon the possible mutually beneficial economic activity of married couples—a theme in *Peggy Sue Got Married*—then why would anyone want to prohibit gay marriage?

By providing such an energetic endorsement of marriage, the film opens the door to those who would argue that the matrimonial institution is further strengthened by stripping away irrational, discriminatory, and unwarranted restrictions that otherwise hamper society's overall economic potential. Capitalism is the true religion here because a legal marriage contract potentially offers more incentive for gay couples to engage in mutually beneficial economic behaviour. Allowing gay couples to be legally married will, therefore, increase social wealth and strengthen the nation's position on capitalism.

In summary, five of the films—*Back to the Future*, *Pleasantville*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Big*, and *The Family Man*—represent the sum of the fantastical stabilising and destabilising metaphors that caricature the most intractable promises, desires, and goals of Reaganism where the slogan, 'Morning in America,' is forever relevant. It is a continuously recycled day of comfortable success in neighbourhoods with happy, affluent suburban families secure in their identities and in the stability of a nation where civil tensions are nonexistent and ideological differences are invisible. The sixth film, *The Truman Show*, signifies the grand-scale industry of illusory stagecraft that has changed qualitatively the ways in which we immerse ourselves in a media environment brimming with films, television series, and promotional campaigns that tout their 'realistic' virtues.

While this study focused on the degree to which romantic comedies set in fantasy either stabilised or destabilised Reaganism, other genres—including war and crime dramas—were employed that simplified the complex underlying causes of behaviour, and vindicated the reasons for fighting foreign enemies along the same

script lines offered by the president. Films such as *Red Dawn* (Milius, 1984), *First Blood* (1982), and *Lethal Weapon* (Donner, 1987) echoed strong Cold War, defense, and anti-crime messages that were associated with Reagan. However, it would be instructive to examine just how the elements of fatalism rooted in these films serve to challenge and disassemble the seemingly stable veneer of Reaganism, especially with regard to individual's liberties, rights, and expectations that their lives are not short-changed for political expediency. With regard to a fatalistic perspective, there was at least one extraordinarily prominent example, *The Day After* (Meyer, 1983), a film about nuclear war watched by one of the largest audiences ever for a made-for-television production,[343] came amidst a fierce political debate about whether or not the United States should renounce the 'first use' of nuclear weapons.

The film, which contained some of the most graphic depictions ever shown on commercial television up to that time, apparently persuaded Reagan and Joint Chiefs of Staff to move forward on a treaty effectively cutting the superpowers' nuclear arsenal despite his pronouncement earlier that year claiming the Soviet Union was an 'Evil Empire.'[344] Incidentally, the film contained many of the same conventions found in 1950s anti-nuclear films dealing with nuclear war and its catastrophic effects, including the medical impact of radiation exposure, huge numbers of severely injured people trying to enter hospitals, and the hopeless efforts to restore a sense of normalcy to communities. However, the story is set in the 1980s, focusing on families in Kansas and Missouri living in precisely the same sorts of communities Reagan spoke about so warmly and frequently.

At the height of Reagan's popularity, films such as *Back to the Future*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, and *Big* were justifiably safe bets for box-office success given how they effectively stabilise Reaganism. Meanwhile, the 1998 release of *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show* were far enough removed from the Reagan era for Hollywood to pursue comfortably (at least from an economic rationale) as worthwhile creative projects challenging the admiring fantasies behind Reagan's brand of conservatism. Ironically, many of the same myths channeled for distribution by the same media

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[343] Aired on 20 November 1983 on the ABC television network, *The Day After* was seen by more than 100 million people.

[344] Reagan (1990, p. 595) wrote in his autobiography, *An American Life*, that the film, which he described as greatly depressing, had changed his mind about the nation's nuclear defense policy.

conglomerates often are intertwined with the machinations of Hollywood's culture industry.

The multilayered readings of these films, therefore, are not merely curious academic exercises of theory building or validation. As we acknowledge the incipient colonising aspects of how the culture industry frames, constructs, and communicates messages on layer upon layer of social, political, economic, and cultural canvases, we become gradually better primed to decode and demystify the implicit messages of films, especially in terms of the period during which they were produced. More plainly, we regain our awareness of issues and events from our history that had been submerged so deeply so as not to intrude upon the popularised imaginations of an escapist chronicle of some past story. Reaganism seems an appropriate and approachable proxy because the president himself was a product of the Hollywood dream-making factory.

Our discursive diagnosis, so to speak, ultimately liberates us from becoming paralysed or desensitised at the superficial level. Much like the reluctant heroes portrayed in the six films, we face the always-present elemental choice between false consciousness and true self-discovery. If we can nourish and cultivate our inner voices of dissent against the fictions that masquerade as our alleged identities, we can become more astute to and proactive against the stultifying, colonising impact of our media and entertainment industries. Empowered with this fresh acknowledgement, we then can seek out comprehensive narratives that repel the disenfranchising, imperialist, chauvinistic, and racist frames that, regrettably, have remained at the core of our most persistent myths and social imaginations.

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