

*Gender  
politics  
and the  
Other*



**E.T.**

THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL

Robin Wood coined the term “Spielberg-Lucas syndrome” in her critique of the 1982 Hollywood blockbuster *E.T.* within her book “Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond”. Wood’s creation of the ‘syndrome’ ruthlessly deprecates Spielberg’s desire for regression into infantilism and the subsequent evading of any adult spectatorship responsibility. He argues that the film leeches onto a masquerade of nostalgia, failing audiences in glossing over key cultural and political discourses under Reagan’s administration. The focal point of *E.T.* leans on the acceptance of Otherness, however, as Wood calls it: “irredeemably smug” is the fact in which America’s nation was founded on the denial of such - “radical feminism, gay liberation, black militancy” - misinformant and misguided is Spielberg’s embrace of the extraterrestrial creature, under the repressive shadow of the white patriarchal bourgeois culture.<sup>1</sup> Wood’s commentary proves itself to be rather distasteful, it holds accuracy and credit in certain areas, but struggles to take away any pragmatic complexities of Spielberg’s fantasy; to discuss the “Spielberg-Lucas syndrome” from a neutralised perspective is to analyse the ideology of Otherness in relation to politics, culture and gender. Perhaps proving that the true under current of the film lies within a realm of nostalgia, as opposed to an unhinged lapse into infantilism.

*E.T.* revolves around an alien who is stranded on earth and befriends a young boy: Elliott. The extraterrestrial being is brought into the Californian suburban house and introduced to Elliott’s brother and little sister, Gertie, who decide to keep its existence a secret. However, E.T. falls ill, resulting in government intervention and a distressing journey for all.

## Political agenda in *E.T.*

Wood speaks to contextual political ideologies during the early 1980s that conflict with the film’s relationship to Otherness; in his eyes, the ‘syndrome’ is only perpetuated by the uprising of masquerading in the Reagan Hollywood era. Spectatorship, particularly among older generations, elevated regression into infantilism as the adult spectator “immerses themselves in fantasy and accepts the illusion.”<sup>2</sup> Attacks

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Wood. “Papering the Cracks: Fantasy and Ideology in the Reagan Era.” *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. 1st ed, (Columbia University Press, 1986), 147.

<sup>2</sup> Wood, “Papering the Cracks”, 151.

on American politics, most emblematically the attack on the patriarchy during the 1970s, laid the foundation for a liberated cinema of the early 80s - which Wood argues - is rejected by Spielberg.

Spielberg's political agenda is exemplified through his critique of law enforcement in conflict with the Other. E.T. is introduced as Elliott hears commotion in the yard, meandering out nervously in the pathetic fallacy of an ominous moon-lit night. His torch light emanates a sterile stark white, he emerges himself within the tall grass, following E.T.'s footprints. Diegetic crickets chirping and a deep wind whistling builds tension and connotes his seclusion. Our vision, obscured by the grass branches that are moved from eye-line by Elliott, reveals a tense shot-reverse-shot between a screaming E.T. and a shrieking Elliott. Spielberg amplifies his left-leaning views through a juxtaposing chase scene with authorities as E.T.'s final appearance, criticizing Reagan himself as a military leader of the US. Wood says "the Carter administration promising a sense of liberalism" was debunked by Reagan's success.<sup>3</sup> The popularity of Spielberg's ideals is evidence of the "desire denied for community and empathy" and epitomises the "escapism and privatism" as direct measures of "progressive potential" within American politics.<sup>4</sup>

Such anti-authority ideologies are emulated when Elliott, E.T., and counterparts cycle away from them and toward the forest to return E.T. to his spaceship before the government kidnaps it. Triumphant non-diegetic music induces excitement as police sirens permeate. A dynamic side-view shot captures Elliott speeding down the street, the authorities speeding beside him. At one point two police cars line up below a hill where the children will pass: unwilling to oblige, they ride over the car, connoting their direct criticism of American authority. Several closeups of the children's feet pushing the pedals along the rocky terrain build tension. The fantastical element of the sequence is epitomised when E.T. telekinetically elevates them into the sky, up and over the astonished agents and policemen. Wood rebuts such special effects, "as capitalism approaches its breakdown, through the series of economic crises, its entertainments must become more dazzling" and exceedingly needless.<sup>5</sup> Suburban LA's beautiful landscapes are depicted, they ride toward the blaring sun, warm orange tones immerse the frame. The motif of light and the juxtaposition of sterility to warmth is emblematic of Elliott's fulfillment and acceptance of Otherness.

<sup>3</sup> Wood, "Papering the Cracks", 153.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Ryan, and Douglas Kellner. "Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film". *Fantasy Films*. (Indiana University Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Wood, "Papering the Cracks", 156.

The “adult world of harshness” that conservative films honour, is seen through a child’s perspective as “menacing.”<sup>6</sup> The pathetic fallacy is a key contrasting factor of *E.T.*’s first and final appearances, sun - a metonym for happiness and community; clouds and moon - a symbol of melancholy and isolation.

Despite Wood’s deprecation of Spielberg’s regression to infantilism, his political ideologies speak to a progressive viewpoint: one that attacks governmental abuse of power. Such a “desire to be constructed as children, evade responsibility” is derived from the “anxiety” of overpowering political control.<sup>7</sup> Since Spielberg was a loyal Democrat himself, his agenda speaks to a civilian protection and acceptance of Otherness; however - Wood’s excessive critique still stands, should American audiences have to regress into childhood to embrace and integrate? Whether we classify *E.T.* as infantilism or nostalgia, “these Blockbuster films perform an important social function” to bring families together.<sup>8</sup>

## Gender and the Other

Gender discourse is surprisingly prevalent within the children’s film, Wood off-puttingly rifles through Spielberg’s prejudiced representations of ‘boyhood’, ‘motherhood’ and the nuclear family. *E.T.*’s phony acceptance of Otherness or what Wood would call “anyone external to white patriarchal bourgeois culture, such as women”, is amplified through the cute and cuddly creature that rejects the disturbance of the nuclear family - when the very nature of Otherness is to demand societal transformation. Initially, Spielberg depicts the “oppressiveness of nuclear life” through the children’s incessant arguing, Wood implies this is as a result of the father’s “defection.”<sup>9</sup> Spielberg “seems incapable of thinking beyond this - all he can do is reassert the goodness of family life by reinstating a paternal figure as the scientist”; more logically we can understand that such forceful nuclearity also reflects external oppressive patriarchal structures that dictated feminine domesticity and overt heteronormativity.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael & Douglas, “Camera Politica”.

<sup>7</sup> Wood, “Papering the Cracks”, 158.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Kramer. “Would You Take Your Child To See This Film? The Cultural and Social Work of the FamilyAdventure Movie.” *Children Beware!: Childhood, Horror and the PG-13 Rating*. (East Anglia: McFarland, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Wood, “Papering the Cracks”, 145.

The opening sequence following the spaceship landing depicts Elliott, his siblings and their friends playing an intense match of board games at the kitchen table; the typical 1980s suburban Californian mise-en-scene, plaid shirts and stained glass mosaic lamps. A static mid-shot details cards, games, soda and snacks beside Mary, Elliott's mother, who unpacks the dishwasher quietly. Mary's pink robed costume is an embodiment of femininity. Commotion ensues in the yard, her son's immediate reactions implicit of her maternal weakness: "You stay here mom! We'll check it out..." The chaos is suggestive of a critique of single motherhood and women's "main function being to be rescued by the men, involving their reduction to helplessness and dependency."<sup>10</sup> Despite Hollywood's alignment with anti-feminism - the 'threat' of female autonomy - E.T. itself, as an Other, is sympathised with. Wood despises Spielberg, for America, as "a nation that was founded on the denial of Otherness," is now producing cinema where "Otherness is something we can all love and cry over."<sup>11</sup> Spielberg's ignorance of misogynistic gender normativities through his masquerade of nostalgia and fantasy, glazes over contextual gendered hardship. However, the spectacle of *E.T.* still upholds extraordinary entertainment properties that can "transcend class, race and gender."<sup>12</sup>

*E.T.* as a fantasy film feeds into what Wood refers to as, the "adult male fantasy about childhood", catering to a culture of "true boyhood" which allures male audiences. E.T. is an embodiment of this infantile masculine fantasy: "the innocent extra-terrestrial who is at once patriarchally empowered, paternal, and child-like."<sup>13</sup> Spielberg's setting on Halloween reinforces stereotypes of feminine 'prettiness' and masculine 'strength' through costume and mise-en-scene. Elliott's fantastical and adventurous childhood is emphasised in the silhouette shot of him and E.T. cycling past the full moon in the sky. Spielberg briefly and indirectly "deconstructs toxic masculinity" through the character development of Elliott's older brother who bullied him for believing in Aliens before he realised E.T.'s true existence.<sup>14</sup> To summate, Wood's evaluation of femininity and boyhood maintains his regressive merit, and in fairness

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<sup>10</sup> Wood, Robin. "Images and women." *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. 1st ed, (Columbia University Press, 1986), 227.

<sup>11</sup> Wood, "Papering the Cracks", 163.

<sup>12</sup> Kramer, "Would You Take Your Child To See This Film?"

<sup>13</sup> Peter Ohlin. Review of *Science-Fiction Film Criticism and the Debris of Postmodernism*, by Annette Kuhn, Constance Penley, Elizabeth Lyon, Lynn Spigel, and Janet Bergstrom. *Science Fiction Studies* 18, no. 3 (1991): 411–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240095>.

<sup>14</sup> Wood, "Papering the Cracks", 164.

requires detailed analysis and unpacking to divulge gendered politics; but: sensibly so, Spielberg secondarily alludes to contextual patriarchal rigidity while foremostly providing nostalgic content as a means to attract interpassive familial pleasure.

## The ‘Spielberg-Lucas Syndrome’ and Americanisation

*E.T.*'s portrayal of culture, envelopes Spielberg's warped reflection of the American 'Dream' and creates a vast realm of nostalgia, or in Wood's argument: infantilism. The "Spielberg-Lucas syndrome" here, only aids in perpetuating Hollywood's false acceptance of the Other. 1980s fantasy film, as Wood coins it, reflects "the disturbing phenomenon of children's films conceived largely for adults," in other words: cinema that reconstructs the adult spectator as a child; crucial here is the "urge to evade responsibility".<sup>15</sup> During the body of Spielberg's film, *E.T.* is left home alone, the entirety of the sequence cuts between *E.T.* and Elliott at school to emphasise their physical and emotional interconnection. The immediate Americanisation of *E.T.* after less than a day in American suburbia, alludes to the imminent nature of American culture and tradition. *E.T.* opens the fridge and animalistically grasps at a container of pre-packaged potato salad, to which it eats directly from the container before discarding it onto the floor. A quizzical non-diegetic tune connotes *E.T.*'s gradual adaptation to its new lifestyle. *E.T.* then opens a beer can, followed by 3 more, guzzling each one dramatically. The shot cuts to Elliott in class who burps instinctively, appearing tipsy and disorderly. *E.T.*'s gluttony is implied through his careless and messy behaviour, pouring beer down his chest and neck as he skulls it. The tempo of the non-diegetic music quickens as the scene progresses. The television is turned on to an American sit-com and *E.T.* continues to laze around, drinking and eating, a true hedonistic representation of Americanisation; linking to Reagan's original slogan: "Make America Great Again."<sup>16</sup> From an infantilised perspective, a "sincere representation of energy in relation to a generally oppressive civilisation," the sequence proves rather

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<sup>15</sup> Wood, "Papering the Cracks", 160.

<sup>16</sup> Wood, "Papering the Cracks", 167.

comedic.<sup>17</sup> Wood criticises Spielberg for his exploration of Americanisation, debunking the ideology that “someone so ‘Other’ can adapt so easily” to American culture.<sup>18</sup>

Spielberg induces a range of commentary on American culture throughout *E.T.*, also reflecting on the American cultural fear and conspiracy of government voyeurism. By exploring voyeurism as a catalyst of American conspiracy theorism, Wood may argue that this is too infantilised: the voyeuristic government agents that appear almost spy-like. A silhouette depicted in the foreground of the frame details a government agent listening in to Elliott’s household from a van outside, in an attempt to expose E.T.. A slow zoom lingers toward the agent, ominous non-diegetic music builds as he listens. The perpetuated pathetic fallacy of nighttime, accompanied by the white flashing electronic lights of the sound panel in the background of the shot create a visual link to the opening scene where E.T. 's spaceship landed in LA; suggesting notions of secretiveness and unknowingness. Spielberg actively manifests “what a structuralist analyst would term ‘underlying’ narrative structural patterns” through his aesthetic repetition - feeding into the attraction of children to the film itself.<sup>19</sup> Conclusively, *E.T.*’s reflection on American culture in relation to Otherness allows adult spectators to regress to infantilism by immersing themselves within childish notions, and simultaneously creates a nostalgic atmosphere for audiences to indulge in.

In an attempt to prove the film's greater reliance on nostalgia, perhaps Wood's critique is so strong that even in rebuttal or pragmatism, we are still left with a pervading sentiment of infantilism. Although, the deliberate unpacking of politics, gender and culture - all in relation to the Other - we can better grapple with the ignorance of the ‘Spielberg-Lucas Syndrome’, and perhaps also paradoxically resonate with an atmospheric entertaining experience of nostalgia.

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<sup>17</sup> Wood, “Papering the Cracks”, 166.

<sup>18</sup> Wood, “Papering the Cracks”, 158.

<sup>19</sup> King, Geoff. *Spectacle, Narrative, and the Spectacular Hollywood Blockbuster*. 1st ed, (New York, Routledge, 2003), 117.

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