Great Expectations:

The Role of Myth in 1980s Films with Child Heroes

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ABSTRACT

This study performed a mythic analysis on three films with child heroes including *E.T. – the Extra-Terrestrial*, *Stand by Me*, and *The Goonies*. Several unifying themes were extracted and then compared with the dominant values of Reagan America to determine if these films provided a unique cultural outlook. While most of the uncovered themes have been recognized in other films of the era, the theme of childhood as a community in peril is unique. It is purported these films pass judgment on Reagan as a dubious national patriarch, and that it is possible that this is a function that many myths with child heroes fulfill.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Heroes have dominated the storytelling landscape for millennia. In the majority of classic myths, the hero is an adult male on a quest, who undergoes a series of tasks in order to save his home or people. What do Superman, Hercules, Sherlock Holmes, and George Washington have in common? By and large, almost any American can identify them, but what is the common thread that allows them to reach such an exalted status? The trait that they share is that they are all heroes. The hero is still wildly popular in current stories, but the adult male is no longer the only segment of the population represented (McGee, 2007). In the 1980s, filmmakers expanded upon the identities that their protagonist heroes could hold in interesting ways. Unlike the classical era, women began assuming roles resembling those of classic heroes, like Sarah Connor in *The Terminator* (1984) and Ellen Ripley in *Aliens* (1986). But another demographic assumed this role in an even more radical shift from their classical predecessors: children.

The Goonies (1985), *Stand by Me* (1986), and *E.T. - the Extra-Terrestrial* (*E.T.*) (1982) each feature a group of young children on quests, a situation which is rare in foundational western mythology. The fact that these adolescent heroes are even placed in these positions problematizes popular philosophies of cinema in the era. While an element of nostalgia of youthful adventures is no doubt at play in these fantasies, their call to action also implicates a number of institutions that have failed to accomplish these quests in order for them to fall unto the shoulders of children. These are pessimistic views of authority, both institutional and parental, that run through all of these stories.

This study will examine three American films of the 1980s; *The Goonies*, *Stand by Me*, and *E.T. - the Extra-Terrestrial*, in an attempt to find the ways in which films with adolescent heroes share distinct themes in this era in cinema. For this study, an adolescent hero is one that is ostensibly under the age of 13, as "teenage hero" would present a very different group of themes. The teenage heroes are granted more independence, violence is expected to be a more prevalent part of their lives than younger characters, and parental and state expectations of them are quite different. For example, responsibilities like employment or the care of significant others weigh heavily on a teenage hero, where they do not on a child hero.

Adolescent heroes of the 20th century are much different that their predecessors from Ancient Greece, where much of accepted Western myth derives (Pache, 2004). Greek heroes were defined by personal achievements in their lifetimes, some examples of which were city

founder, warrior, or discoverer. However, this leads to complications when discussing child or adolescent heroes, as they do not perform any of these deeds. Still, it is apparent that child heroes played a large part in Ancient Greek religion, as there are shrines and festivals dedicated to them that still remain in Greece today (Pache, 2004). While they do not perform specific traditional deeds, they serve a more general function in Ancient Greek myth. For the Ancient Greeks, as well as for modern storytellers, the "narratives of child heroes thus stress the dangers inherent in childhood and making the transition to adulthood" (Pache, 2004, p. 6). The modern child heroes, however, are set apart from their predecessors due to their participation in mythic roles and quests.

These films have been chosen because, on their face, the heroic myths that they portray are very similar, although occurring in different scenarios. Also, they were successful upon release and have maintained a prominent place in popular culture.

This thesis will explore the three films through a blend of two methods of mythic criticism in order to demonstrate how the role of the child hero is unique in the cinema of the 1980s. Mythic criticism allows the critic to explore how the hero and his or her journey are common throughout all cultures, as well as the ways in which they are different. These subtle differences can say a great deal about the values and traits of the culture in which the stories originated, as this speaks to ideals that are held dear in a public consciousness. 1980s cinema will be contextualized through previous literature that indicates that it is one of the most important decades in the history of cinema, due to the transformative shifts in the industry in that time. The analysis will examine this one aspect of this definitive era in cinema and question the types of mythic roles that these adolescent heroes adopt, and whether their call to action disturbs themes of conservatism that runs through the popular cinema of the decade.

Chapter II: Review of Previous Literature

This literature review sets out to determine how previous research has explored the uses of mythic criticism, as well as contextualizing the 1980s. Joseph Campbell, the father of mythic criticism and a mythologist himself, will be discussed in terms of his classical monomyth. Following the discussion of the classical monomyth will be an investigation of a popular variation of the monomyth called the American monomyth. Next, a battle in the academy to define myth will be discussed. Dominant themes of President Ronald Reagan's rhetoric will then be highlighted. The review will conclude with a review of key literature focusing on cinema of the 1980s in order to articulate some of the ways that uniting themes reflected Reagan's rhetoric.

Mythic Analysis

The Monomyth

Mythic analysis began as a tool through which rhetorical critics could use the monomyth to interpret and appreciate modern stories, and it still forms the basis of the majority of mythic critiques in rhetoric. Joseph Campbell's seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, introduces the classical monomyth (1949). The monomyth is about the narrative of the hero's journey, which Campbell describes as "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (1949, p. 30). Campbell proposes that this basic structure is found in narratives throughout dozens of cultures for thousands of years.

The monomyth has three distinct phases. First is the Departure. This stage usually begins with a sense of normalcy before some information or event plunges the hero into the journey. The next step is Initiation. Having begun the hero's journey in a new and exciting world, this step provides crucibles for the hero to test his mettle. The final phase is called the Return. Having faced the tests and completed the given task, the hero must return to his or her home. This is not always easy, as there can be resistance equal to those faced before the completion of the task. Identifying the ways in which a hero deals with the tasks that confront him or her allows the critic to assign a mythic role to the hero. Examples of mythic roles are warrior, healer, and founder (Campbell, 1988). Another element that Campbell's method can

expose is the function of myth. Campbell described several basic functions of myth. They are the mystical, the cosmological, the sociological, and pedagogical (Campbell, 1981). The mystical creates images of wonder and awe; the cosmological demonstrates the form of the universe; the sociological validates social orders; and the pedagogical guides an individual through major life crises.

Campbell's approach is applied to many different analyses, and the monomyth remains a popular tool for interpreting media artifacts. For example, the monomyth is directly applied to films like *Spider-man* (Koh, 2009) and *The Matrix* (Rushing & Frentz, 2009), as well as documentaries like *An Inconvenient Truth* (Rosteck & Frentz, 2009).

The American Monomyth

Several variations on Campbell's classical monomyth have been developed over the past six decades. One of the most popular is the American monomyth, which was developed as mythic criticism was achieving strong recognition in the academy (Jewett & Lawrence, 1977). Robert Jewett and Shelton Lawrence, both professors of philosophy, provide a concise version of this variation in *The American Monomyth* by stating "A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity" (Jewett & Lawrence, 1977, p. xx). Jewett and Lawrence describe several ways that the American monomyth violates commonly conceived democratic values. The authors state that the American superhero "conveys a pessimism about democratic institutions and public responsibilities, a messianic expectation that society can be redeemed by a single stroke, and an impatience with constitutional processes" (Jewett & Lawrence, 1977, p. 215). With roles such as the "Lethal Patriot," the structure is heavily rooted in the Judeo-Christian themes of redemption. The authors claim that the western genre has been the foundation for a great deal of American mythology, and therefore the attitudes that western heroes employ become admired and repeated throughout the culture's stories. The gunfighter is the clearest example of the rugged, individualistic warrior who seeks redemption for not only himself, but endangered communities. The redemption is often achieved through violence, a process that was heavily explored by cultural critic Richard Slotkin in a trilogy of books about the American western myth entitled

Regeneration through Violence (1973), *The Fatal Environment* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation* (1992).

In 2002, Lawrence and Jewett published *The Myth of the American Superhero*. The thesis has not changed from *The American Monomyth*, but the examples are multiplied and, for the most part, updated. With artifacts like *The X-Files* and *The Matrix*, the authors describe how the "motifs of superheroic redemptive violence become significant points of departure in tracking American mythology because their predictability opens the doors to our sensibilities" (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, p. 5). In effect, our attitudes are reflected in what we watch and read. Motifs are perpetuated not due to innovation on the part of the creator, but because publics consume them consistently.

This reflection has never been more apparent than in the years following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The American monomyth became a tool used to interpret entertainment television shows like HBO's *Deadwood* (Lacroix & Westerfelhaus, 2006) and popular films such as *V for Vendetta* (Ford, 2009). When audiences are sensing dissonance in their culture, they seek out stories that play out a retribution scenario. In this case, many were concerned about the violent reactions of the American military, including instances of torture. The western heroes in *Deadwood* respond to insurgent savagery but prove that they themselves have a propensity for savagery. At first, the hero V stands alone against an Orwellian government, reflecting increasing paranoia in the post-Patriot Act United States.

Mythic Patterns

Neither Campbell's nor Lawrence and Jewett's variation discuss effectively all of the ways that meaning can be derived from stories using mythic analysis. Aesthetic elements of visual media (film and television) such as lighting, set design, and camera movement can also be viewed as gateways to meaning. This exploration is driven by the need to "investigate a greater number of dimensions of the narrative itself—dimensions beyond characters, settings, and actions—and the opportunity to analyze not simply the content of a worldview but the form and structure of that worldview" (Foss, 1996, p. 401). Media critic Michaela D. E. Meyer, in her article "Utilizing Mythic Criticism in Contemporary Narrative Culture: Examining the 'Present-Absence' of Shadow Archetypes in *Spider-Man*" describes these considerations and notes that "Narrative criticism, particularly mythic criticism, must account for these varied uses of symbols

over time, context, and culture by shifting scholarly focus to mythic patterns rather than cohesive myths retold in a variety of narrative guises" (Meyer, 2003, p. 526). Meyer proposes that patterns be interpreted in terms of how they are used within the context of the artifact itself rather than attempting to attach them to analogous themes in the monomyth. This is in large part because the meanings are determined by how the aesthetic elements create patterns that are used in the artifact, and that similar patterns can even have multiple meanings within the same artifact.

Mythic critic Donna Rice Shehorn takes a similar approach, though she proposes that characters in literature be interpreted based on mythic motifs rather than purely aesthetic ones. In her article "Mythic Criticism and Interpretation" she stresses that a critic should not focus heavily on the narrator of a work because this "May lead us to overlook other elements intrinsic to the text such as structures which underlie and which help to inform its final meaning" (Shehorn, 1977, p. 160). She suggests that characters may inhabit a mythic role in addition to the one that they assume in the plot. This analysis assumes that characters, like the heroes in these films, do indeed inhabit this mythic role.

The Great Debate

Mythic criticism found itself the subject of some debate when Robert C. Rowland published "On Mythic Criticism" in 1990. Rowland, a professor of communication studies, believed that mythic criticism was being mishandled and being applied too broadly. He argued that "A number of critics have stretched the definition of myth far beyond its traditional usage" and that there should be a more strict definition (Rowland, 1990, p. 101). He developed several functional and structural rules which should appear in an artifact before it can be considered myth.

Rowland's "myth formula" created quite an academic stir and generated several responses by other scholars. Martha Solomon (1990) questioned the rigor of Rowland's statements, wondering why he did not provide evidence for his claims when lack of evidence is precisely the problem he had with current mythic scholarship. She also disagreed with his assessment that texts are monolithic, containing only a singular truth that a critic must uncover rather than containing multiple interpretations. Osborn (1990) found similar contradictions in Rowland's argument, saying that "if we critics were to overlook a strong element of mythic appeal in a work, simply because it lacked sufficient formal qualities, then I would say that we

would be allowing our preoccupation with and loyalty to a critical method to interfere with our work of offering the best critical reading possible of the discourse in question" (p. 127).

Of the responses, Janice Hocker Rushing's was the most vehement. Rowland had directly criticized a number of Rushing's works, indicating that she had misused and misunderstood not only the perspective as a rhetorical tool, but that she has also labeled artifacts as myth when they were not. In her article "On Saving Mythic Criticism-A Response to Rowland," Rushing wrote that "Rowland's reformulation of myth is a narrow and conservative one that imposes its own mythic worldview of functional empiricism on the conceptualization of myth, and encourages a sterile form of criticism that reduces the interpreter to a passive recorder of events" (1990, p. 136). Rushing wanted the critic's role as interpreter to remain intact and to have a definition that allows for creativity when selecting artifacts as well as interpreting and evaluating them. Rushing developed an argument that addressed Rowland's definitions step-by-step, revealing numerous problems with the function/structure solution that she uncovers by using Campbell's words.

It is no small challenge to question Rushing's approach to myth. While Campbell is the grandfather of mythic analysis, Rushing is certainly the perspective's mother figure. She nurtured the perspective, using it to examine many different types of artifacts including the American western myth, Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" address, and the funeral of Princess Diana (1983, 1986, 1998). She also turns her attention to many popular films including *Jaws*, *Alien*, and *E. T. – the Extra-Terrestrial* (1993, 1989, 1985).

In her article analyzing *E. T. – the Extra-Terrestrial*, Rushing takes the opportunity to criticize scholars for largely ignoring entertainment media. She says that "We tend to stumble over them, when it is possible that they best reflect the changing consciousness of our times, simultaneously envisioning exigencies and imagining responses" (Rushing, 1985, p. 199).

Other Applications

The debate over the definition of myth continues to impact mythic criticism. In *The Hero and the Perennial Journey Home in American Film*, media critic Susan Mackey-Kallis takes an alternate approach to the issue. She admits that she has a broad perception of the definition of myth, but many of the chapters include a "Section that problematizes either mythic models generally or their application in particular films" (Mackey-Kallis, 2001, p. 3). She does

this to offer "Some middle ground between the two camps in mythic criticism," which formed due to the Rowland debates (Mackey-Kallis, 2001, p. 3).

Communication scholars have taken mythic analysis far beyond mediated stories as well. Analysis of mythmaking is not bound exclusively to fiction. Journalism professor Phillip J. Chidester (2009) writes about sport as myth in "'The Toy Store of Life": Myth, Sport and the Mediated Reconstruction of the American Hero in the Shadow of the September 11th Terrorist Attacks." He sets out to "Interrogate the shared public efforts of athletes, sports leagues, and media myth-makers to reshape America's relationship with sport as a contemporary myth system in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks" (Chidester, 2009, p. 352). He argues that the media have made a significant push to reinforce the mythic function of sport after the attacks because the public has become so accustomed to finding heroes in the modern sports stars, and that seeing these heroes back on the field would help the public readjust after the attacks. Chidester looks at sports articles from major newspapers in the days after the attacks, and his thesis seems remarkably clear. If there is something that could be highlighted more it is the "Rhetorical battle for mythic supremacy" that took place on the pages of the newspapers (Chidester, 2009, p. 354). Even while remaining on the sports pages, there were certainly objections to returning to the baseball and football fields so quickly, at least with the columnists. It would have been interesting to see how parties resisted the urge to place the athletes in a mythic status.

The Kennedy family has often found itself paralleled to myth, the family's informal moniker of Camelot being proof. Rhetorical critic John W. Jordan (2003) points to John F. Kennedy's address in which he promised that an American would walk on the moon within the decade to highlight the way in which the president elevated ambiguous goals to a mythic inevitability. To be put in terms of the monomyth, the president is claiming that the journey has already begun and that the cycle will soon be complete, rather than providing a call to begin the journey anew. The rhetorical strategy is effective and Jordan argues that presidential rhetoric was profoundly impacted thereafter. There has long been an intrigue surrounding JFK; perhaps because he was one of the most admired presidents in history, maybe because of his assassination, or it could be his ability to create an exigency through mythic rhetoric. Jordan believes that it is Kennedy's acts which elevate him, rather than the acts performed upon him, and the article supports this thesis well.

Despite having fewer articles dedicated to mythic criticism being published recently, there remains a committed following and a variety of ways in which it can be performed and these perspective have been used to interpret everything from manifest destiny (Bass & Cherwitz, 1978) to the television show *Judge Judy* (Foust, 2004). From Campbell's initial research, an interesting and appreciated rhetorical perspective has bound outward in all directions. His monomyth continues to be a reliable tool to examine the abundance of mediated stories produced today, and the variations on it have also been very successful. Scholars have researched aesthetic elements in order to discover myth-based meaning and others have explored how the myth-making process takes place in modern societies. The meaning of myth itself has been debated, but the perspective remains. Like any era in human history, today's hero stories cannot be avoided. Thanks to Campbell, no hero's journey need go unrecognized.

As far as the "mythic formula" debate goes, I share my perspective with Rushing, allowing a more eclectic variation of mythic criticism to be utilized for the study. For this study, elements of Campbell's monomyth and Lawrence and Jewett's American Monomyth will be employed as critical basis.

"New" New Hollywood

The selection of the films for this study was not coincidental. The 1980s opened up the opportunity for adolescent protagonists through significant alterations that took place in Hollywood during the decade. In fact, the changes were so considerable that Stephen Prince argues that "they rank alongside the coming of sound in the 1920s and the breakup of the industry's oligopolistic ownership of production, distribution, and exhibition in the 1940s" (2000, xii). Two major shifts occurred in the decade rank among the most important in industry history. The electronic format of the video cassette recorder (VCR) was introduced in the late 1970s and was popularized in the 1980s. The VCR made films available for viewing in the home. At this point, the secondary marketing of videocassettes, rather than the theatrical market, became the primary revenue stream for the Hollywood industry (Prince, 2007). But this certainly did not signal the end of theatrical exhibition. In fact, exhibition saw an increase in the decade. Because there was a massive demand for product on video cassette, more films were being pushed into production. The exhibition stage was no longer about an artistic expression

best displayed on 35mm film, but the first step in a business chain. This leads into the second major change in the 1980s (Prince, 2007).

The sale of video cassettes was not the only driving force of secondary markets. By the 1980s, each of the major studios of Hollywood, except for Disney, was bought by multinational communication companies. For example, Columbia was purchased by the Coca-Cola Company in 1982, and Rupert Murdock's News Corporation took over 20th Century- Fox in 1985. These companies sought not only to produce a commercially successful film, but to tie a film with as many viable ancillary markets as possible. These included soundtracks, novelizations, and action figures that would all be released and marketed in conjunction with the picture. No longer was a film marketed, or even pitched, as a standalone product, but rather as a complete "home entertainment" package (Prince, 2007, p. 7).

This shift in the industry brought a new generation of successful filmmakers. The auteurs that defined the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s struggled to find a place in the 1980s. William Friedkin (*The French Connection, The Exorcist*), Martin Scorsese (*Mean Streets, Taxi Driver*), and Francis Ford Coppola (*The Godfather, Apocalypse Now!*) all struggled to maintain commercial success through the same style of ironic and raw filmmaking that made them triumphant only a decade prior (Prince, 2007). Rather than approaching ideological problems like the films of the 1970s, the 1980s brought the "clean" blockbuster that took their cues from powerful producers rather than inspired auteurs (Britton, 1986). Principal among these producers were George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, as they were able to capitalize on the shifts in the cinema marketplace.

As director and producer, the duo compiled a stunning number of successful films and franchises in the decade, including two of the films being examined. In stark opposition to the counter-culture appeal of *Easy Rider* (1969) or the targeted adult audience of *The Godfather* (1972), the films of Lucas and Spielberg appeal to teens and pre-teens with "uncomplicated emotional appeal" rather than the ambiguous and sometimes desperate narratives of their predecessors (Prince, 2007, p. 8). Their products were also heavy on adventure and visual effects, elements that have intercultural appeal, lend themselves to areas of secondary markets, and became staples of the blockbuster film from thereon.

While the adolescent appeals of their films led to great commercial success, industry trends suggests that it also meant that each film remained conservative in order to attract the maximum number of viewers (Prince, 2007).

A Conservative Landscape: Reagan and America

In 1980, America lingered in the malaise of the post-Vietnam era and an ineffective term of Democrat Jimmy Carter. Enter Ronald Reagan. Reagan became wildly popular during his first term as the American President, bringing with him a "vision of America that reinvigorated the nation" (Lewis, 2000, p. 312). Despite being labeled as "the Western world's most gifted communicator" (Lewis, 2000, p. 312) opponents compiled during his years in office, with many citing similar objections to his rhetoric and his policies. He was said to portray "ideology without ideas" and he is accused of being "unrealistic, simplistic, and misinformed" (Lewis, 2000, p. 313). The Reagan presidency is described by Ritter and Henry as "pastoral," because he relied on his oratorical abilities to shape an American outlook rather than actual policy (1992, p. xiv). Gil Troy says "Reagan was a great teacher, an extraordinary preacher, a master of parables, conveying complex ideas in short, friendly soundbites that stirred the American soul" (2005, p. 2). It is when this political rhetoric, a form of symbolic action, failed to accurately reflect the conditions of America and to world around her that opponents began to recognize dissonance among the nation's publics.

Reagan relied heavily on storytelling in his rhetoric. To maintain popularity, he used commonly understood American myths to inspire a nation through their own history. Reflecting on heroes like John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, Reagan presented the values that America should hold most dear (Lewis, 2000). One popular myth that Reagan often referred to was that of the frontier myth (Rushing, 1983). It is often used to demonstrate the benefits of rugged individualism; with the pioneers and cowboys dominating the space between the oceans, establishing the American west. However, one of his most important addresses causes a fundamental shift in this trope. On March 23, 1983, the president introduced the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), commonly referred to as "Star Wars." SDI was a defense platform that would be able to disable nuclear missiles from orbit above the Earth. No longer is the frontier the finite land to the west, rather it is infinite space. Needing the rugged hero of the western to change along with the scene, individuality becomes the counter-agent to technological progress.

Now it is a community of similar ideas and goals that coalesces to allow for success on the New Frontier (Rushing, 1986).

Despite such an idealistic vision, Rushing claims that "Reagan's transcendence to a new realm, however, is an *illusory* one" (1986, p. 429). She says that while his claims are rhetorically effective, they are also "morally suspect" (1986, p. 429). Rushing says "the problem with the view of history implied in 'Star Wars' is that Reagan's attempt to return to the 'good old days' through an ideal projected future conjures up an *appearance* of timelessness and spacelessness" (1986, p. 429). In essence, Reagan claims that yesterday was good and that tomorrow should be like yesterday. What is left out, however, is today. With such focus on scene the agents, the hard working American people that Reagan so often refers to in his speeches, are left out of the picture. Progress marches on without them.

"Star Wars" had opponents immediately. The *New York Times* called it science fiction, while former Defense Department advisers claimed that realizing this vision was as likely as "a fountain of youth or a universal cure for cancer" (Rathjens & Ruina, 1983, p. 19). Rachel Holloway contends that "Reagan simultaneously rejected scientific criticism from influential scientists while maintaining the efficacy of science through a rhetoric of the technological sublime" (Holloway, 2000, p. 210). The technological sublime refers to a merging of technological progress with a type of religious fervor. Through an encounter with the technological sublime, observers emerge in awe of "our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us" (Nye, 1997, p. 7). By calling upon the technological sublime, Reagan frames "Star Wars" within a "broader notion of American destiny" (Holloway, 2000, p. 220). Those opposed to him were outside of this vision, opponents of progress due to their "unwillingness to dream" (Holloway, 2000, p. 221).

Another crucial moment in the Reagan era came during the campaign for re-election in 1984. Reagan ran a number of advertisements during the campaign collectively known as "Morning in America." The advertisements claimed that major progress has been made in America since Reagan's election, accompanied by romantic images of Americana a la Norman Rockwell. The advertisements served as essential display of Ronald Reagan' rhetoric, "discourse characterized by optimistic, upbeat, patriotic themes that emphasized a renewed sense of national identity and unity" (Morreale, 1991, p. 3). The advertising campaign demonstrates

the myth of rebirth, based upon the "Edenic idea of an idyllic past that has been lost but can be regained" (Morreale, 1991, p. 47).

Like much of the Reagan presidency, reaction to the campaign was mixed. Americans were inspired by the progress made during the decade, including a faltering Soviet Union and a booming economy. But Troy adds that there "there was mourning in America, too, as the social pathologies of crime, drugs, ghettoization, failing schools, family breakdown, and ineffectual immigration policies persisted along with a growing superficiality and selfishness, even hard-heartedness, as the wealthy seemed to reap Reagan's bounty disproportionately" (2005, p. 5). Despite Reagan's push for a transcendence from individualistic pioneer to the collective community "Reagan's America felt less engaged, less constrained, less interdependent than ever" (Troy, 2005, p. 6). Troy continues his criticism of Reagan, stating "In the individualism he worshiped, the hypocrisy he embodied, and the politicization of moral discourse he facilitated, Reagan further undermined the traditional collective mores he so proudly hailed" (2005, p. 6).

Despite so called discontinuities in Reagan's rhetoric and political behavior, he was re-elected in a landslide victory in 1984, winning 49 states. Americans could rest assured that they would see the morning for at least four more years. This does not mean that everyone was satisfied with a Reagan America. Criticisms of the administration flow throughout much of the popular cinema of the 1980s, including the few successful films of that era featuring adolescent heroes.

Anti-Reaganism on the Screen

Hollywood, in order to maximize profit potential, is by its nature conservative in the products produced. But that does not mean that there isn't room for oppositional thinking in Hollywood films, even those that seek blockbuster status. Some elements of the American Dream as framed by Reagan were being questioned in the 1980s, even as these same elements were being "celebrated throughout the decade, mythologized by politics, and embraced by the dominant culture and social discourse" (Holt, 2007, p. 210). Film historian Jennifer Holt described this friction, saying "healthy images of family, community, a multicultural society, a strong national identity, the belief in capitalism, individualism, and freedom-all crucial to the construction of the American collective consciousness and the vision of the American Dream that thrived throughout the 1980s-were embattled on the screen…" (2007, p. 210). Finding this

in the most popular films of the era suggests that "resistant liberal forces existed in American culture at odds with the dominant conservative value system" (Ryan & Kellner, 1988, p. 259).

The technological revolution brought both hope as well as paranoia in the early 1980s. Unlike the Reagan rhetoric of using technology to forge a new frontier, several films of the 1980s "fed the fear that technology was a false panacea masking deeper troubles" (Grindon, 2007, p. 152). The lighthearted *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1984) features a plot involving the veteran crew of the starship *Enterprise* saving the technology savvy future from itself. In order to do so, the crew must travel back in time to an era before the technological boom took over the planet in order to return with a pair of whales, which are extinct in their time. In order to save their destiny of exploring "the final frontier," they must first rescue casualties of the technological frontier. In James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984), a cyborg from a machine-controlled future comes back in time to kill the mother of mankind's only potential savior. Released only a year after the announcement of SDI, the overlapping of fiction in reality are intentionally frightening. The cause of mankind's downfall is a military satellite system called SKYNET, which heavily resembles the SDI system. The system becomes self aware and begins a nuclear assault on the world's major cities. Cameron followed *The Terminator* with *Aliens* (1986), the sequel to the highly successful horror film, *Alien* (1979). The film is quite different than its suspenseful, claustrophobic predecessor; a change indicated by its tagline "This Time, it's War." In the film, a platoon of well armed soldiers is sent to explore a base that has been infested by hostile extra-terrestrials. However, their dependence on superior firepower becomes their downfall and most are dispatched by the enemy, leaving the female heroin to face-off with the alien Queen on her own. While the films with child heroes are not so explicit in their damning of technology as *The Terminator*, they share the very similar theme of the need to "return to nature rather than a dependence on technology as a means of responding to the challenges of the future" (Grindon, 2007, p. 156). More specifically, they reference the need to depend on elements of *human* nature like compassion and empathy in order to save us from ourselves.

Reagan's appeals to old-fashioned values made portrayals or references to of small-town life and life in the 1950s popular subjects for films in the 1980s. But rather than being sunny retrospectives, these films "mixed nostalgia and malaise" (Grindon, 2007, p. 147). Whereas Reagan attempts to call forth memories of more stable, hegemonic nation with his references to

the 1950s, their treatment on the screen "presented a disturbing vision of passion, confusion, and violence erupting to shatter a thin veneer of complacency. Beneath the desire for a more tranquil union simmered divisive tensions" (Grindon, 2007, p. 166). In *Hooisers* (1986), a former college basketball coach comes to a small town to lead woefully equipped high school basketball team. He soon realizes that typical youthful experiences like an education that can lead to college and even proper parenting are little more than illusions for many of the students in the school, and the teachers give little in the way of encouragement. Everyone knows that, in Hickory, Indiana, basketball is your only ticket out of town. David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) explores these tensions even deeper. A college student visiting his small town home is pulled into a seedy world of sex, kidnapping, and brutality. What is not clear, however, is where wholesome town values end and where the seedy underbelly begins. Such ambiguity "confounds Reagan's appeal to stable, clear, and universal values as the bedrock of his conservative creed" (Grindon, 2007, p. 163).

Missing or mistrusted authority figures are not unusual in the cinema of the 1980s. For Spielberg, absent fathers becomes a very personal common element in many of his films (Brode, 2000, p.125). While still a child, Spielberg's father left his family, so Spielberg often interrogates the notion of childhood without appropriate male role models. The massively popular Indiana Jones franchise contains two examples of this. In the third entry to the series, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), it is revealed that Jones left his father as a teenager after feeling ignored at home. Only after an adventure involving Jones' rescue of his father from capture by the Nazis and pursuit of the Holy Grail are they able to come to reconciliation. In the second entry of the series, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), Jones acts as a surrogate father to a young Chinese boy nicknamed "Shortround." There is no explanation of the boy's background, but obviously his original guardianship failed. While Jones does an adequate job protecting Shortround, with the exception of allowing him to become embroiled in dangerous scenarios to begin with, a question arises as to the fate of the character. While Jones appears to take his role of surrogate father seriously, Shortround is absent *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, which take place one year and four years, respectively, after *Temple of Doom*. It seems as though Jones has himself become an absent father, the same crime for which he so vehemently detests his own father.

Some demographic communities felt that they were under attack in the Reagan era. One of the most prominent of these is women. The Reagan era was marked by several firsts in terms of the perception of women in policymaking. He was the first Republican elected that did not support the Equal Rights Amendment, which stipulated equal rights regardless of sex. Republicans also began to support constitutional amendments to ban abortion and refuse to ratify any federal judge that supported the procedure (Rapf, 2007, p. 23). While the decade began on a bleak note for women, they did rally onscreen. Positive female role models appear on the screen, role models who refuse "to be a servant, to be a victim, or to be patronized" (Rapf, 2007, p. 41). In addition to women inheriting the predominantly male role of the violent hero in a film like Aliens (1986), women are also shown defying social expectations. Examples include *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), which is based on the true story of country music singer Loretta Lynn, and *Private Benjamin* (1980), which is about a woman who joins the U.S. Army. In both cases, the female lead finds themselves in dire situations that seem to present insurmountable odds. Lynn is married at the age of 13 and is a mother soon after. Benjamin finds herself overwhelmed by boot camp, which she believed to be much less harsh than it turned out. Despite these setbacks, both characters prevail. Lynn is able to compromise with her husband to share childcare duties while she pursues the unlikely path toward stardom in the country music business, while Benjamin convinces herself not to quit boot camp and proceeds on a number of adventures that result in promotion (Rapf, 2007).

Since Campbell created mythic criticism it has been utilized to interpret a wide range of artifacts. The initial monomyth has even proliferated into several other productive methods of examining mythic elements. A collection of artifacts examined through these methods derive from the rhetoric of President Reagan, as well as media reflections on this rhetoric. These reflections, at least in the movies of the 1980s, were often framed in doubt or discontent.

Chapter III: Method and Description of Artifacts

Method

This thesis is a case study examining three American films from the 1980s, all of which feature adolescent heroes. Therefore, the four elements being brought together are cinema, the 1980s, myth, and children. Previous literature explicitly explores connections between film and myth as well as the 1980s and film. However, connections between film and children as well as myth and children are far less common. This project is proposed as a case study because it can add to the missing research on the latter connections, while also referring to the former connections as a way of determining the exceptionality of this type of film.

In the analysis section, a number of themes will be extracted from the films using mythic criticism. Guiding my use of mythic criticism will be several questions that seek to flesh out potential themes that intertwine throughout the films. For Campbell's monomyth, questions asked include:

1) Do the opposing forces in the films consist of a distinct mythic demonology?

2) What mythic roles are suggested by the heroes' behavior and the mythic structure utilized?

This section will also be used to tease out the ways in which the films utilize elements of monomyth. This, along with interpreting how the heroes interact with one another, their enemies, and their environment, will determine what kind of mythic role the hero is fulfilling.

In addition, Lawrence and Jewett's American monomyth will be customized to the 1980s and employed to answer the following questions:

1) Do the films convey pessimism about authority and the dominant conservative values of the Reagan era? And if so, how do they convey this pessimism?

2) What roles within the American monomyth do the heroes aspire to, and which do they become?

3) In what ways does the heroes' environment (the "harmonious paradise") influence their call to action?

In the discussion section, the impact of these findings will be discussed, attempting to achieve two overarching goals. First, the themes will be evaluated in terms of the prevalent themes of the Reagan era as indicated in the literature. Second, their status within a greater framework of 1980s cinema will be evaluated. In essence, the analysis seeks to reveal whether

the cultural reflections revealed in these three films are in line with dominant ideologies of Hollywood during this era. If all three films share several themes that are oppositional to those pointed to most often in the previous literature about the films of the 1980s, then the myth that these films propagate stand as a unique case. However, if many of the themes are shared, then these films are filtered through popular ideology of the time.

Description of Artifacts

As a rhetorical tool, myth refers to the archetypal narrative structures in our stories (Shehorn, 1977). However, myth is powerful because it leaves such a significant impact on the culture from which it derives. The previous and continued commercial successes of these three films are evidence that they captured some portion of the cultural zeitgeist in the United States, but their place in popular culture goes even deeper.

The Goonies

The Goonies (1984) was directed by Richard Donner (*Superman, Lethal Weapon*) and produced by Steven Spielberg. The cast included established actors Robert Davi (*License to Kill, Die Hard*) and Joe Pantoliano (*The Sopranos, Memento*) as the villainous Fratelli brothers, and several members of the youthful cast including Josh Brolin (*Planet Terror, W.*), Sean Astin (*Rudy, Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring*), and Corey Feldman (*The Lost Boys, The 'burbs*), went on to several more successful films in Hollywood.

The Goonies are a group of children in Oregon who are on a journey in search of pirate treasure while outwitting a group of adult gangsters named the Fratellis. Pirates were some of the most violent warriors in history, and the gangsters are an immediate threat, but neither group ever takes precedence over the adventure at hand or the "loot" to be found. The motivation for the journey is the inability of the parents of the Goonies to save their small town from a corporate buyout. With the failure of the status quo system of the parents providing the best possible future for the children, the children undergo a quest to rescue their own fate.

The film was the ninth highest grossing film of 1985 and remains a favorite on the home video market, with sales of the DVD remaining high (boxofficemojo.com, 2010). The film was first released on the Blu-Ray high definition format by Warner Bros. on November 2, 2010. The film got the "Deluxe Edition" treatment on Blu-Ray, which to this point had been reserved for

Academy Award winning classics *Casablanca* (1942), *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

The film's influence is not recognized only by the studio that produced it. Influential British film magazine *Empire*, upon its 20th anniversary of publication, ran a number of features about definitive films of the proceeding two decades. These included films like *Braveheart* (1995), *American Psycho* (2000), and also reunited the cast of *The Goonies,* an occasion that was even advertised on the magazine's cover (June 2009). Also, in 2008, the magazine released a list of the 500 greatest films of all time, and *The Goonies* came in at number 378 (November 2008).

The Goonies extends its reach outside of the cinema community as well. In Astoria, Oregon, where the film takes place, there are "*Goonies* Tours" which take visitors to various shooting locations from the film and June 7, the day that the film was released, is now "Official Goonies Day" according to the Mayor of Astoria (oldoregon.com, 2010).

Stand by Me

Stand by Me (1985) was directed by Rob Reiner (*The Princess Bride, A Few Good Men*) and adapted from a novella by Stephen King ("The Body", 1982). It also featured a cast that went on to success, including River Phoenix (*My Own Private Idaho, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*), Wil Wheaton (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*), Jerry O'Connell (*Crossing Jordan, Jerry MaGuire*), John Cusack (*Say Anything, Eight Men Out*), Kiefer Sutherland (*24, Young Guns*), and Corey Feldman, alongside veteran Richard Dreyfuss (*Jaws, Close Encounters of the Third Kind*).

In the film, a group of boys in a small town set out to find the body of a boy who has been hit by a train. Because the authorities have been unable or unwilling to seek out the body, the boys make an attempt to recover the body so that they can get their names and pictures in the paper. Along the way they discuss the maiming of one of the boys by his own father (who is a veteran of the World War II), and the rejection of two of the other boys by their own families due to no fault of their own.

The film was the 13th highest grossing film of 1986 (boxofficemojo.com), and on *Empire*'s list of the 500 greatest films of all time, *Stand by Me* was number 70 (November 2008). Like *The Goonies*, *Stand by Me* left an impression on an important place. In the summer of 2010, the town of Brownsville, Oregon, where the film was shot, held a 25th anniversary festival

in the film's honor (to celebrate the start of filming rather than the release). Cast and crew from the film came and spoke with the townspeople and a blueberry pie eating contest was held (based on a scene in the film) (democratherald.com, 2010).

The film also made a strong impression on Reiner. Reiner felt that most of his early work was heavily influenced by his father, comedian, actor, and filmmaker Carl Reiner (*The Jerk, Ocean's Eleven*). However, he claims that *Stand by Me* is the "first film that was an extension of my personality" (Reiner, 2000). He felt so strongly about his identification with the film that when he began his own production company a year later, he named it Castle Rock, after the town in which the film takes place.

E.T. – the Extra-Terrestrial

E.T. - the Extra-Terrestrial (1982) was directed and produced by Steven Spielberg (*Jaws, Schindler's List*). The cast includes early appearances by C. Thomas Howell (*Gettysburg, The Outsiders*) and Drew Barrymore (*Charlie's Angels, Scream*), as well as Dee Wallace (*Cujo, The Frighteners*) and Henry Thomas (*Legends of the Fall, Gangs of New York*).

The film revolves around a boy named Elliott who is struggling to adjust to a new home environment, which has been shaken by divorce. He meets an unusual creature, which turns out to be an extra-terrestrial (hence the name given to him, E.T.), and befriends him. Elliott discovers that his new friend is seeking a way home, and they work together to meet this goal. Before his people can get to Earth to recover him, E.T. is abducted by agents of the Federal government and Elliott must work to free him and get him to the rendezvous with the incoming alien vessel.

E.T. was the highest grossing film of all time from 1982 to 1997 (boxofficemojo.com). On Empire's list of the 500 greatest films of all time, *E.T.* is number 47 (November 2008). Respected film critic Leonard Maltin compiled a list of 100 must-see films of the 20th century, and only two films represented the 1980s; *Raging Bull* (1980) and *E.T.* (filmsite.org, 2010). In addition, the famous shot of Elliott and E.T. silhouetted in the moon became the logo for Spielberg's production company, Amblin Entertainment.

Also important are the ways the films with child heroes exhibit or do not exhibit the trends in the film industry in the 1980s. One of the major trends was the boom of the ancillary markets through which products related to the films would disperse. *E.T.* is not only the most

successful of these films, but of the entire decade. Perhaps due in part to its success, the film made a major stir with one of its product tie-ins: the candy *Reese's Pieces*. The candy became a big seller after the release of the film, leading successive films to replicate the strategy in order to offset production costs (Van Biema, 1982). However, the marketing executives at Universal Studios believed that they had "fumbled the ball" when it came to finding even more product tie-ins, due to this being an early film in the era of the ancillary markets and underestimating the likability of the E. T. character (Prince, 2010, p. 362). There were no Saturday morning cartoons to accompany the most successful film ever to that point, and toy lines did not appear until months after the film's release (*New York Times*, 1982). There was a videogame released for the Atari 2600 console, but rushed production resulted in what many consider one of the worst video games in history. The sales were so poor that some historians believe that it played a large part in the crash of the video game industry a year later (1up, 2011). However, the soundtrack for the film, with music by frequent Spielberg collaborator John Williams, was released. A novelization of the film was also released in 1982.

It seems as though Warner Bros. didn't learn from Universal's mistake with E.T. *The Goonies* also featured little in the way of tie-ins or other products. An official magazine was produced, along with the film's soundtrack. There was also a popular music video, starring the cast of the film, which featured Cyndi Lauper's "The Goonies R' Good Enough." *The Goonies* did spawn several video games for the MSX system, the Nintendo Entertainment System, the Commodore 64, and the Famicom system (Kalata, 2011). *Stand by Me* did the least proliferation, with nothing more than the motion picture soundtrack.

In retrospect, one of the most interesting experiences that these three films share is that they represent the beginning and the end of their respective journeys. Bucking the wildly popular trend in the 1980s to sequalize profitable films, all three adventures stand alone. *Stand by Me*, of the three films, comes to the most definite conclusion. After the boys disperse, the narrator discusses the futures of all of the principal characters. *E.T.* and *The Goonies*, however, seem to leave a more significant opening for sequels. In fact, the filmmakers got so far as to discuss making sequels for both. The sequel to *E.T.* even had a title, *E.T. II: Nocturnal Fears* (Wilson, June 16, 1984). However, neither went past the discussion phase.

Chapter IV: Analysis

It is because so many people were drawn to these stories that they adopt such cultural, or mythological, importance. By utilizing familiar narrative structures to demonstrate cultural themes, the filmmakers tap into the public consciousness. Popular culture scholar John Cawleti suggests that "strongly conventionalized narrative types…are so widely appealing because they enable people to re-enact and temporarily resolve widely shared psychic conflicts" (1971, p. 12). Essentially, conventions serve to "assert an ongoing continuity of values" (Cawelti, 1971, p. 28). The values presented in these films will be grouped into four uniting themes. These themes, taken together, attempt to answer the questions inherent in mythic criticism and will be placed in context with the socioeconomic or sociopolitical arrangements to which they may be responses.

Paradise Evoked: Reagan and Small-Town USA

Questioning how the heroes' environment influences their call to action reveals one of the most important unifying themes. Not only do the motivations of many heroes stem from their personal "paradise," the heroes are irrevocably tied to these communities. They reflect the values from which they are born and raised, as their predecessors in the classical age do.

There is a geographical relationship between the settings of all three films. In every case, the heroes are living in a suburban, almost rural environment surrounded by a forest. In the case of *The Goonies*, the community is literally nearing destruction. Developers have targeted their town in Oregon, dubbed "the Goondocks," as the site for a new country club.

In *E.T.*, the film begins by playing with the viewer's preconceptions. The film opens in the forest where a group of aliens are seemingly exploring the environment. Moments later, a group of humans chase them back to their ship. Exposure to previous science fiction films about extra-terrestrials on Earth would lead viewers to assume that the aliens are malevolent invaders (with an obvious exception of Spielberg's previous alien film, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), and that the humans in the scene, whom we can identify with more so than the barely humanoid aliens, are acting in the best interest of the community.

In *Stand by Me*, another group of boys have an adventure in a small Maine town, this time in the 1950s. The town of Castle Rock is shaken by the disappearance of a local boy, who the boys discover has been hit by a train several miles from town.

In each case, they are in small towns that are edged by the woods. For children, woods often serve as boundaries, forbidden areas which daily adventures occur after arriving home from school. But there is reason for setting these stories in the small, rural town beyond presenting an opportunity for action, which is to question a particular set of political values.

Questioning if and how the films convey pessimism about dominant conservative values of the Reagan era reveals several connections between this theme and the political climate of the time. Many of the values of the Reagan era in Washington evoked the 1950s. These included fervent anti-communism, optimism in current American prosperity, and appeals to the values of that time. Some films are explicitly placed in this period, like *Stand by Me*, while others reference it through the small-town America settings which define the era. But the themes presented in these films hardly reflect the Reagan ideology. In fact, film scholar Lerger Grindon argues that the three films present Reagan values as "fundamentally irretrievable or an ideological fabrication," and that the "division between the aspirations and the reality of small-town America spoke for the divided feelings within the culture at large" (Grindon, 2007, p. 147).

This contradiction of ideology can be seen in several instances throughout the films, all of which provide frictions integral to the stories. In *The Goonies*, the heroes are set against several obstacles, but chief among them are the developers who will be taking their community. Reagan's "Morning in America" ignores such a possibility, that the people of Astoria will wake tomorrow and go to work to support their families. Desperate to continue their journey toward redemption, Mikey pleads with his fellow Goonies in a statement countering Reagan's rhetoric. He says "Don't you realize? The next time you see sky, it'll be over another town. The next time you take a test, it'll be in some other school" (Donner, 1986). The Goonies are betrayed by Reagan's words, and the film critiques the Reagan economic policies that encouraged the rich to become richer at the expense of those that are not in their elite club. The idea is driven home by the fact that the site where the Goonies live their lives will soon be a country club, where the wealthiest families lounge and play. Similarly, Chris in *Stand by Me* is blamed for theft of money that he returned; blame he suggests would not have fallen upon him if he were in an affluent family.

"Invisible Boy": Authorities as Mistrusted and Missing

Questioning how the films convey pessimism about authority and the dominant conservative values of the Reagan era unlocks another theme. Adolescence is meant to be a time when a person is cared for, when responsibility is still the realm of an authority figure. However, these communities, and adolescence itself, are threatened by a failure of the authority figures to take on the responsibilities of protecting and encouraging the youth. There are several groups of authority figures to which pessimism is reflected. Law enforcement is almost completely inept in the films. A dangerous gangster escapes prison in *The Goonies* and is not caught in the initial chase or in the manhunt following. When Chunk calls the police giving them the location of the gang, the officer laughs him off, believing that he is crying wolf. If not for the actions of the boys, the gangsters may not have been caught at all. Officials in the town of Castle Rock fail to find the body of a dead boy in *Stand by Me*, while a raucous gang terrorizes the town. In *E.T.*, the federal authorities pursue E.T.'s cohort, and they fail to realize that an 11 year old boy is harboring and assisting the alien for days. In the film's final act, E.T. appears to die after being taken in by the authorities. Even when E.T. is revived and Elliott attempts to get him home, the authorities continue to resist and try to recapture them. Authority figures are treated by the film with such disregard that many, including the teacher and police officers, are given a voice but no face. Many of the federal officers are seen but not heard, while some are completely dressed in space suits. Elliott's father is neither seen nor heard. In *The Goonies*, the only adults present outside of the film's introduction and conclusion are the Fratellis and their deformed family member Sloth. Similarly, *Stand by Me* presents only the parents of Gordie and none of the other boys. The only other adults seen are two different store managers and a junkyard dealer.

Another target of the films is the authority figures associated with formal education. Reagan had a number of agendas involving education, including instituting mandatory prayer in school and abolishing the Department of Education. Neither became a reality, as the public perceived that the public education system in the United States was troubled enough (Cannon, 1991).

The perception that action is required in the realm of education comes through in *E.T.* and *Stand by Me*. The films share a brief ideological convergence with Reagan values in this regard, but their commentary on the problem reflects negatively on Reagan's response. While

both Reagan and the films recognize a problem in the formal education process, the films portray an irritation that makes solutions like school prayer seem short-sighted and simplistic. In *E.T.*, the students are asked not only to dissect frogs, but to be the killers of the creature themselves. Elliott is disturbed by this, setting the frogs free. Obviously sympathizing along with him are his classmates, who assist in their liberation. He feels that the teacher's insistence that they dissect the frogs draws a frightening parallel to the possible discovery of his alien friend, so he defies the authority figure. As the situation collapses, the teacher exclaims "I can handle this!" although he clearly cannot.

In *Stand by Me*, school provides a devastating experience for Chris. He relays an emotional story to Gordie which represents the predicament that having the family name places him in. At school, he stole a batch of milk money, but he soon returned it to one of the teachers. However, the money never finds its way back the school. The teacher stole the money and blamed Chris, but no one would believe his side of the story. His mistrust in authority is rooted in this event, as it only occurred because of his name. As he explains, the teacher never would have stolen the money if one of the "boys from up on the hill" had returned it (Reiner, 1986).

In these cases, authority figures associated with formal education are viewed as either ethically ignorant or malicious. Despite the lapses of the schoolhouse, all of the adolescent heroes learn and grow through their experiences. In all three films, *E.T.* is the only one that even shows school on-screen, and at that for only a few moments. Sharing a theme of teenage films of the same era, "education isn't even in the picture; it's the irritant" (Aufderheide, 2000, p. 14). A chief example of a failure of the system is the gang of older boys in *Stand by Me*. They are already driving, so they are likely in the later years of their high school career. Despite this, they are far from model citizens that present a serious threat to themselves and the people around them.

Unfortunately, school is not the source of the harshest irritation for the adolescent hero. The question of whether or not opposing forces in the film consist of a distinct mythic demonology is answered in the affirmative, with the failures of their parents assuming this role. In *Stand by Me*, Gordie's brother is killed in a vehicular accident prior to the events of the film. His parents are shaken by this, but rather than being supportive of their surviving son, they emotionally abuse him. He is "the invisible boy" in his household, suggesting to Gordie that

they wish that he had been the one killed rather than his star athlete brother (Reiner, 1986).

Gordie is so disenchanted by this that he begins to believe that his passion for writing is a

worthless one compared to his brother's football talent, to which Chris claims "That's your dad

talking!" (Reiner, 1986). He then tells Gordie that "Kids lose everything if there's not someone

looking out for them. If your parents are too fucked up to do it, maybe I should" (Reiner, 1986).

Gordie is not the only one with troubles at home. Teddy's father, whom the boy proudly

exclaims "Stormed the beaches at Normandy!", physically abuses him and is locked up in an

mental health institution during the events of the film (Reiner, 1986). Even so, he defends his

father when a junk yard owner insults him. But, while unaware of his own emotional problems,

he unconsciously reveals his feelings when he suggests an unusual ending to a humorous story of

"Lard Ass" that Gordie tells around the campfire. Teddy suggests that the ending of the story

should be Lard Ass going home and shooting his father. His emotional state is also seen very

clearly when he stands in front of an oncoming train, claiming that he is going to doge it when it

comes near. Chris intervenes, barely removing Teddy from the tracks in time. Although upset

by this, Chris is able to calm Teddy and they proceed on their adventures. Teddy, like Gordie

and Chris, clearly wishes to escape Castle Rock. However, in the closing narration it is revealed

that his physical injuries prevented him from joining the military. Trapped in Castle Rock, he

spends some time in jail before picking up inconsistent work in town.

Chris is the peacemaker for both Gordie and Teddy, but he also has problems that stem

not from particular actions of his own, but from seedy social expectation. Chris' family is a

notorious one in Castle Rock for breeding troublemakers. Before anyone even met Chris,

"Everyone just knew he would turn out bad" (Reiner, 1986). Gordie reinforces his own faith in

Chris, insisting that he can succeed in school and he can, despite the assumptions of anyone in

Castle Rock, get out of this town and be a positive influence. Chris defies expectations and does

just that. When normal institutions fail, the boys turn to one another.

This theme of parental failures also appears in *The Goonies*. The home of the boys will

be destroyed in only a day's time, but the central character, Mikey, insists that his dad will find a

way to save the town. His friends, his mother, and his brother all maintain that he is

disillusioned. Mikey realizes that they are right, and as soon as an opportunity becomes

apparent, even an opportunity as wild as a mythical treasure; he takes it upon himself to lead the

group to victory. In route to their prize, he claims that "Down here, it's out time" (Donner,

1985). With that, the Goonies band together to acquire the riches of a pirate, the ultimate anti-authority figure, by beating his tests and acquiring his personal collection of treasure. Like Peter Pan, the children defeat the pirates before returning, triumphant, to their community. Because of their victory, the group will not be split up and the Goondocks can continue to be a thriving environment for childhoods.

In *E.T.*, the characters if Elliott and E.T. are tied together, both literally and figuratively. As they spend time together, the two begin to share more than just affection for one another. Elliott begins to actually feel what E.T. feels. When E.T. is frightened, Elliott feels fear; when E.T. becomes very ill, so does Elliott. But the two do not become intertwined simply because they spend time together, but rather because they are sharing an experience. Both are lost boys, much like Peter Pan's cohort in Neverland, who have been abandoned by their respective authority figures.

E.T. is left behind accidentally by his fellow explorers, but Elliott's situation is not a result of chance. His father has abandoned his family, leaving a mother that is struggling to support three children. When Elliott unintentionally remarks about his father, upsetting his mother, his older brother exclaims that he needs to "Think how other people feel" (Spielberg, 1982). This advice leads to an emotional connection to E.T. that most people could never have; Elliott and the alien are both lost children searching for their place. Elliott takes great risks in his quest to save E.T., which is seen in microcosm when he frees the frogs at school.

In need of assistance, E.T. turns to Elliott, Elliott turns to his older brother, and his older brother turns to his group of friends at the film's conclusion. They believe that only they can or should save E.T., a manifestation of their own desire to be found. Elliott explains that only children can see E.T., just as they are the only ones that would believe that their bikes can fly.

These heroes closely resemble The Lost Boys of Neverland in *Peter Pan*, only they are misplaced as young boys rather than babies. In these films, it becomes clear that the demonology is most prominently represented by authority figures such as teachers and parents. However, unlike the Lost Boys, these adolescents are seeking to restore, replace, or maintain these relationships. But, despite their efforts, the most common result is replacing authority figures with their fellow adolescents. Reagan was a family values politician, as many high-profile conservatives have been. In fact, family was one of his most frequent value appeals while running for president in 1980. Reagan argued that it was time to "care for the needy; to teach our

children the virtues handed down to us by our families; to have the courage to defend those values and virtues and the willingness to sacrifice for them" (Scheele, 1984, p. 54). In addition, Reagan implied that if the liberal administration of the Carter Administration were to continue, their policies would "undercut the positive values of family solidarity and pride" (Scheele, 1984, p. 54). But Hollywood presents the idea of the problem free, church going nuclear family as one of the "irretrievable" values. For these children, another morning in America could mean being forced from their homes or finding that a parent has abandoned them, physically or emotionally.

Pan's Paradise: Children and their Mythic Inter-reliance

Due to sources of authority, especially parents, making up the demonology of the three narratives, the films suggest that an alternative answer to the question of the heroes' environment influencing their call to action may be preferred. The threatened paradise may not be a place at all, but rather childhood itself. While the small town setting provides a commonality of place, childhood is a commonality of experience. This arrangement also alludes to the type of mythic roles the heroes inhabit.

This is seen clearly through the nostalgic nature of the first person narration in *Stand by Me.* The narrator, a middle-aged Gordie LaChance, looks back on these events after he learns of the death of a childhood friend. With the obvious benefit of hindsight, he reflects upon the paradisiacal condition of childhood, saying "We knew exactly who we were. We knew exactly where we were going" (Reiner, 1986). Perhaps childhood itself is the "harmonious paradise" that is threatened, and thus only children can be its sentries? There are elements in each film that lend weight to this paradigm. In *The Goonies*, the children best not only the evil corporate destroyers, but also an archetypal group of Italian gangsters, wild car chases and shootouts included. Beyond this, their victory is won by discovering pirate treasure, the ultimate boyhood Robert Louis Stevenson fantasy. The prize is not just the bounty, but being allowed to remain in their homes and to remain children together for as long as their innocence will allow. A final clue comes in E.T., when Elliott's mother is reading *Peter Pan* to Elliott's younger sister, Gertie. Only children could battle the insidious grown-ups in Neverland, an idea that Elliott adopts when he pleads with his siblings to keep E.T. a secret, even from their mother. He tells Gertie that "Grown-ups can't see him, only little kids can see him" (Spielberg, 1982).

Each group of heroes makes it clear that they are on a quest that only they can pursue. They do not simply forget to include their parents or teachers in their dangerous adventures, they consciously avoid them. Rather than resorting to requesting their help, they turn instead into the teeth of danger; represented by gangsters, booby traps, and police. It is their decisions to stick together, separate from their authority figures, which suggests their mythic roles.

With the paradise to be saved and the villains acting against them made clear, the question considering the mythic roles that the heroes portray become apparent. While the American monomyth reveals a great deal about the films, the roles the Lawrence and Jewett assign to these American superheroes are almost exclusively dealing with the kind of and amount of violence through which they achieve their goals. The adolescent heroes rely very little on violence, but they most closely resemble the "friends redeem a village" role (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, p. 89). This role is normally associated with the gunfighter of the Western genre, but these heroes trade in guns and horses for wit and compassion. The result is that, at least to a degree, the threatened paradise of childhood is pulled from the flames of threat. Friends are able to redeem childhood not because of the idea that three guns are better than one, but precisely because they are friends. Gordie would be unable to solve any of his or his friends' problems if he decides to look for the body by himself, just as Mikey's life would forever change if he attempts to recover the pirate treasure without his friends.

It is their methods that define the dominant roles in the monomyth for the heroes of *Stand by Me* and *E.T.* Gordie and Chris are placed center stage in *Stand by Me*, with their problems at home made clear through their disclosure to one another. With the failure of their parents to look out for them, they are shaken and disillusioned. However, they turn to one another and find comfort and support. In *E.T.*, Elliott comes across a scared alien in need of assistance. With thorough problems already accumulating in his household, he takes on this responsibility. It becomes clear that E.T. is filling an important role in Elliott's life, even as Elliott is saving his. Both of these relationships reveal that the dominant role of the heroes is that of healer. Outside of E.T. himself, none of the characters are attempting to physically heal another. Rather they serve as emotional healers for one another. More important than any excursion into the woods is the inward progress each character makes, progress that is catalyzed and maintained by their closest friends.

The healer is typically a specialized version of the mentor, a role usually reserved for brief appearances by an archetypal "wise old man" that guides the hero on his or her journey. A perfect example is the centaur Chiron in Greek mythology, a mentor to several heroes including Hercules and Achilles. Upon birth, Chiron is abandoned by his parents. Later in life, he becomes a surrogate father to those he trains. Due to his initial abandonment and eventual attainment of mentor status, he became known as "the wounded healer" (Vogler, 2007, p. 119).

Certainly, the central heroes in *Stand by Me* and *E.T.* exemplify wounded healers. Rather than being helpful to their counterparts due to previously travelling the road of trials, they are helpful because the find themselves on the same road at the same time, physically and emotionally.

While the role of healer exists in *The Goonies*, the dominant role of the heroes is defined by their accomplishments rather than their methods. Without the intervention of the boys, their homes would be literally swept away. But they achieve their goal of saving the Goondocks by recovering a pirate treasure; while at the same time clearing away the untamed barbarians in the gangsters and recruiting an ally in Sloth. Because of this, they more closely resemble the role of founder. Although the town existed before their adventure, it would no longer exist without them. They resemble the hero Aeneas, who appears in both Homer's *Illiad* and Virgil's *Aeniad*. Aeneas participates in the Trojan War before going to Italy and fighting the natives in order to establish the city of Rome (Williams, 1910).

Another interesting aspect of these films is the boys' romanticized perceptions of their own heroes, which may answer the question of what kind of roles they aspire to. In all three films, the children are heavily influenced by the male figures that dominate the media that they consume. The Goonies are attracted to several of these, including high-speed chasing cops, famous pirates, and superspy James Bond. The boys of *Stand by Me* are caught up in discussing a story about a fictional boy, maliciously labeled "Lard Ass" by the community, who gets back at his enemies by vomiting blueberry pie on them. They also sing the theme song of the television series *Have Gun - Will Travel* (1957), a Western about a wandering gunman. Elliott is clearly captivated by the heroes of the *Star Wars* films, as the products seen in his bedroom suggest. In every case, there are male figures who are clearly in opposition to dominant authority (i.e. pirates, the Rebel Alliance) or act in conjunction with but outside of outside of dominant authority (i.e. James Bond, Paladin). It may be the influence of these media that influence the

boys to pursue tasks that will be very dangerous, while simultaneously demonstrating a distrust of the traditional authority figures to assist in the undertaking.

In the end, threats to childhood come largely from social conflict. Class conflict threatens the homes of middle-class Americans, divorce shatters a home with children, and damaging presumptions endanger the opportunities of young people who have yet to take part in any social ills themselves. Reagan's famous "Morning in America" television advertisement claims that "our new families can have confidence in the future" because of Reagan's policies, but it is social ills that come to the forefront of "public dreams" while the nation is on his watch.

The Humanistic Answer

The films also critique another Reagan value, the insistence and reliance on technological development (Grindon, 2007). The clearest example of this insistence is the persistent push to move forward with the Strategic Defense Initiative, which was assigned the nickname taken from one of the most popular films of all time, "Star Wars."

Again revealing pessimism about the dominant conservative values of the Reagan era, traditional technology in the hands of most characters leads to nothing positive in the films. In fact, the only machines truly used for good are those placed in the hands of the children. E.T. and Elliott collaborate to build a device out of household items that is used to communicate with E.T.'s cohort. It is far from a typical machine, and is something that only the imagination and creativity of children would attempt. Another example is the devices used by the character of Data in *The Goonies*. They are seemingly silly gadgets inspired by the James Bond movies, like shoes that spray oil slick and fake teeth that shoot from his sleeve. But despite their unusual nature and naïve construction, they save the group from threats on several occasions. Developments in the sciences were an obsession in America during the 1950s, yet the children of *Stand by Me* avoid any reference to technology. The push against fast developing digital technologies is a theme which Rushing (1985) discussed, and one in which Spielberg himself admits to, stating "I think *E.T.* is the humanistic answer to the technical revolution" (Lenz, 1983, p. 3). Rushing (1985) argues that the film is a significant study in mythic transcendence, or the ability for the human element to overcome outside forces. In the case of *E. T. – the Extra-Terrestrial*, these forces are personified by the Federal agents and scientists, symbols of the cold, antiseptic state. She suggests that the film opens up a forum for debate; asking "how to make

science subservient to humanity rather than humanity subservient to science" (Rushing, 1985, p. 200). Where many scholars found a "charming and entertaining, but ultimately insignificant 'children's film,'" Rushing finds a profound statement on the human condition.

Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusion

According to Pache (2004), child heroes in Ancient Greece were highly celebrated without performing the type of legendary tasks that their older counterparts endured. They were unique in the heroes gallery of their culture. It is abundantly clear that, like adult heroes, the child heroes that inhabit *E.T.*, *Stand by Me*, and *The Goonies* are not going to remain idle while their communities are at risk. But are there mythic themes propagated by the films that make their 1980s cinematic journeys unique in the grand landscape of that decade's films?

All three films contain themes that seem to run counter to key themes of Reagan's storytelling and image management. By evoking the dark side of small-town America, a mistrust of traditional authority and family figures, and a sense of doubt about the technological revolution, these narratives prove uninspired and doubtful of major values that Reagan appealed to through his particular brand of mythmaking during his presidency. While exhibiting themes that run counter to the popular political "community of values" (Cawelti, 1971, p. 28) of the decade seems like a poor formula for capturing the "'public dream' for society in the eighties," all three films demonstrated a great deal of audience drawing power (Lenz, 1983, p. 3). *The Goonies* stayed in the top five grossing films of the week for five consecutive weeks, *Stand by Me* maintained the same standing for seven weeks, and *E.T.* stayed there for a staggering 27 weeks (boxofficemojo, 2011). From the convergence of their themes and audience capturing ability, the "resistant liberal forces" identified by Ryan and Kellner seem to be clearly at work in this case (1988, p. 259).

But standing against the dominant conservative value system is not enough to make these films a unique case. While voters were enamored by Reaganism, audiences went to dozens of movies to see a projection of resistant values, many of them shared by the films in this study. Where these three films stand out is their treatment of childhood as a shared community of experience, a threatened community that creates unique mythic roles for the heroes. Social and familial ills, ills that Reagan would have us believe do not exist or are not as important as the communist menace, threaten to tear childhoods asunder. From the perspective of myth serving as a reflection of culture, a possible extrapolation of the popularity of films that present "fundamentally irretrievable" Reagan values as a cause of such domestic disruption is that audiences can identify with the heroes not only through a nostalgic recollection of their own childhoods, but through a shared feeling of patriarchal abandonment (Grindon, 2007, p. 147).

While omnipresent in the 1980s, Reagan's "ideology without ideas" (Lewis, 2000, p. 313) was not to the benefit of middle class while his economic policies "rewarded the wealthy and corporate sector," and his outward focus on anti-communism and technological revolution did not help to heal the breakdowns within families (Troy, 2005, p. 6). While "Morning in America" was on television sets at home, audiences of these films viewed what more closely resembles a "mourning in America" (Troy, 2005, p. 5).

Is this the particular function of narratives myths with child heroes, to pass judgment on cultural father figures and their ability to fulfill this role? Isolating the general mythic function of the films may lead to an answer. Campbell described the basic functions of myth as the mystical, the cosmological, the sociological, and pedagogical (Campbell, 1981). While all of these exist in certain measure in the three films, the dominant function is sociological. The ritualized mythic plots "suggest important clues about the tensions, hopes, and despair concerning democracy within the current American consciousness" (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, p. 5). Perhaps these films enjoy such success because they "offer such instruction. It may be a 'public dream' for society in the eighties, reworking ancient motifs into shapes especially palatable to contemporary audiences" (Lenz, 1983, p. 3). However, as evidenced by the themes extrapolated through a mythic analysis, it may be distaste for or distrust of the current social order under the Reagan administration that contributed to their massive popularity. Symbolically, audiences feel as though they have been abandoned by their leader.

Further research would have to be done to make a final determination about the extent to which this theme of patriarchal abandonment, as well as the others located in this case study, exist throughout myths featuring child heroes. An obvious next step would be to examine films with child heroes from a different era, for example the 2000s with *Harry Potter* franchise and *Kick-Ass* (2010), to see if a similar function is detected. Another important phase would be to perform a similar analysis on several of the canon works in literature that examine child heroes, works that very likely influence the narratives of these films. Similar findings in *Peter Pan* or *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* could mean that the function not only extends to different eras, but to different media as well.

Additional methods may also provide valuable insight into the way popular films reflect the culture through which they develop. One particular method would be appropriate for current

films while providing an excellent counterpart to mythic analysis. Ernest Bormann's fantasy-theme analysis offers a way for an audience to define its reality by identifying this group's perception of characters and plots within a given event. Bormann explains that this dramatization creates a unique form of myth that influences a group's thinking and behavior (Bormann, 1972). Examining how audience members are influenced by stories, and then go on to influence their social groups because of this, may provide some fascinating insight into the power of these stories. Additionally, it increases the probability of detecting themes that overlap with a mythic analysis. Also, a pentadic analysis deriving from Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism could be used to discover which elements of the stories dominate. For example, if the "scene" element is a dominant one throughout much of the story, then further credence is lent to themes one and three, which focus on the environments that the heroes interact with.

Looking back at the development and popularity of these films, it is shocking that no sequels ever developed. *The Goonies* and *E.T.* were both among the top grossing films in their year of release and they were produced by Spielberg, whose films have inspired numerous film franchises. But there could be good reason for this, and that reason lays in what distinguishes these heroes from Indiana Jones. They are stories that are irrevocably tied to the experience of childhood. Surely one the most famous and well respected fictional chronicles of boyhood comes in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, a story which shares some resemblance to child heroes of films produced more than a century after the novel's publication. At the end of the book, Twain calls our attention to this topic of childhood, saying "so endeth this chronicle. It being strictly the history of a *boy*, it must stop here; the story could not go much further without becoming the history of a *man*" (2006, p. 318).

Twain actually did go on to write sequels to *Tom Sawyer*, but they were no longer stories of innocent adventures into the wild and young love, but rather they were about an older Tom travelling the world in a hot air balloon and becoming a detective. They are very different tales featuring a very different character. Likewise, an *E.T.* sequel would feature an older Elliott facing very different problems than those he faces an abandoned boy. Alternatively, another alien could find himself with another boy, in which case it would be little more than a rehash of the original. Rumor of and demand for a *Goonies* sequel has persisted, even two decades after the films' release (Jacks, October 8, 2007). If a group of middle-aged men were to set off to find a treasure, surely the story would look much different. It seems unlikely that the innocence of

Tom Sawyer and the fantasy of *Peter Pan* would linger on the screen while it is inhabited with men, even men desperately trying to remember how to be boys.

But this is precisely where the films fulfill their promise to the audience. Through masterful manipulations of small wonders, like bikes that fly and a hidden pirate ship, audiences do remember what it is like to be a child. And as soon as they identify with the innocence once theirs, as soon as they drop the defenses only learned through experience, they are struck by the threats set upon the young heroes. This didn't occur with one film featuring child heroes, but the three most popular of the decade. And this is when the impact of myth is felt and the themes seen over and over again in popular films begin to take shape as "public dreams."

Child heroes, through the mythic quests they are tasked with, may be offering insight into the perceptions of their cultural guardians. To find that a similar function runs through modern stories with child heroes would mean that they could be unique, sharing the feature with their ancient brethren. Alternatively, if the films with child heroes of the 1980s are unique in their use of this function, then Reagan's position as a questioned patriarchal figure may be a troubling distinction.

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