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Technoteens and bimbos in the Reagan era : a critique of teenpics in the 1980s

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Prefontaine, Sharon F., M.A.

San Jose State University, 1992

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TECHNOTEENS AND BIMBOS IN THE REAGAN ERA:
A CRITIQUE OF TEENPICS IN THE 1980s

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Communication Studies Department
San Jose State University

In Partial fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Sharon F. Prefontaine

August, 1992

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ABSTRACT

TECHNOTEENS AND BIMBOS IN THE REAGAN ERA:

A CRITIQUE OF TEENPICS IN THE 1980s

by Sharon F. Prefontaine

The thesis examines representative films from the 1980s about and for adolescents, describing the ways in which the adolescent culture is depicted with regard to gender roles, school, family, authority, and technology. In addition, the social and political context of the films is described.

As idea and ideology, the film offers a competing version of social reality and generates a frame of reference within which perception takes place, constituting the basis in terms of which some events will be noticed more or less. To the extent that audiences, including audiences made up of adolescents, are exposed to films and the inherent ideologies of those films, they will be influenced by them, shaped by them, engaged in discourse with them, whether they know it or not. Generally, the ideological stances of the films examined in this thesis support sexism, ageism, immorality, racism and consumerism.

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To Mike
who made the trip worthwhile

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Like all creations of mass media, a film's success, measured wholly in economic terms, depends on its popularity. Like any product, film is geared to sell. Thus it is that the film industry will produce, distribute, exhibit and advertise films to maximize profits. To achieve this goal, it is a basic tenet of communication theory that the seller know the specific audience who will consume the product. From the advent of genre films to the rise of the cult of celebrity worshippers, certain films appeal to certain people, but, more importantly, certain films appeal to certain consumers and are marketed accordingly.

In the 1950s, a new consumer, the number and power of which was heretofore unseen in American culture, germinated from two events, apparently unrelated, but occurring simultaneously. Neither a true subculture nor counterculture, but, more accurately, a unique consumer culture, teenagers, the Brotherhood of Unfulfilled Potential, to borrow a phrase from author Jay McInery, sprang into being. The first event which defined teenagers as a group was the discovery by psychologists, sociologists and, most importantly, market researchers of the culture-within-a-culture. The Dictionary

of American Slang, illustrating the United States predilection for defining sociological phenomena by economic criteria, tells us that by the end of World War II, teenagers had been legitimized as an American cultural group:

The U.S. is the only country having a word for members of this age group, and is the only country considering this age group as a separate entity whose influence, fads and fashions are worthy of discussion apart from the adult world. Before circa 1935 U.S. teen-agers considered themselves as, and were considered, young adults and not a special group.¹

The first specifically identified group of teenagers, the children of adults who had experienced the poverty of the Great Depression firsthand, were the primary beneficiaries of postwar affluence and sprang full-grown, like Athena from Zeus' head, only as consumers. The economic privilege held by American youth provided a basis for their cultural revolution. For teenagers, time and money were the keys to liberation, the same keys which would later free college students for their radical movements and women for the feminist movement. Once they were identified as conspicuous consumers, teenagers were empowered as never before. Thomas Doherty points out that

[w]hat lent 1950s teenagers a sense of group identity both peculiarly intense and historically new was that

¹Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner, eds., Dictionary of American Slang, 2nd ed., (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1975), 538-39.

their generational status, their social position as teenagers, was carefully nurtured and vigorously reinforced by the adult institutions around them. In the marketplace and the media, at home and at school, the teenager was counted a special animal requiring special handling.²

The economic, political and cultural changes of the 1950s established the teenage consumer as a power which has dominated American culture for four decades.

The second event contributing to the rise of teenage consumer power was the colossal change in the movie industry created by a combination of political and cultural shifts. Traditionally, the major studios controlled production, distribution and exhibition of their films. When the Supreme Court applied the Sherman Anti-Trust Act to the movie industry, though, this traditional, monolithic structure was effectively dismantled. Foreign countries, often the sites of low-budget filmmaking, revised their rules as well to assure that they got a bigger piece of the entertainment industry pie. Thus, at home and abroad, the movie industry had to revise its system to profit. This unfavorable economic climate was only part of the problem.

Politically, the movie industry fell victim to the assault of the House Un-American Activities Committee.

²Thomas Doherty, Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 3.

Creativity and productivity were limited severely as Congress scrutinized key individuals, questioning their patriotism and, by extension, the content and very existence of films themselves. The final blow dealt the movie industry was the increasing movement of the population from inner city to suburb where they dug in to raise families and watch television. While movies had originally had tremendous universal appeal, the rise of television combined with the fall of the old studio system forced moviemakers, that they might survive, "to narrow their focus and attract the one group with the requisite income, leisure and garrulousness to support a theatrical business."³ The dissolution of the hegemony of major studios coupled with the exodus from urban to suburban centers led to a hungry film industry that was more market-driven. As affluent consumers with more leisure time than their historical counterparts, teenagers drove the market. Russell Jacoby suggests that "the greater access to money and especially to automobiles, which allowed the young to escape watchful parents, fostered their identities as individuals with specific sexual, musical, and consuming

³Ibid., 46.

needs."⁴ In response to this timely mating of cultural change and economics, the film industry eventually created a new product, what Doherty refers to as "teenpics."⁵ The films that appeared in response to this cultural transformation changed as the industry grew more familiar with its target audience and refined its product accordingly.

Prior to 1956, there was no industrywide consensus on the vital importance of the teenage market, much less an earnest assault on it.⁶ One book which addresses the economic evolution of the 1950s teenpic is Thomas Doherty's Teenagers & Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s. While Doherty's account is complete and well-documented, his conclusion is not particularly far-reaching: "Teenpics can not only satisfy and exploit, they can satisfy by exploiting." Further, he suggests that teenagers are safe from systematic indoctrination by film because the diversity of the market prevents anyone from holding absolute authority.⁷

⁴Russell Jacoby, The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academia (New York: Noonday Press, 1987), 64.

⁵Doherty, 10.

⁶Ibid., 71.

⁷Ibid., 243-244.

In response to this viewpoint that film is primarily a technical and aesthetic creation, and, as such, must be considered simply as a politically neutral consumer product, cultural critics have consistently and, to this author, convincingly, argued that film is much more than a mere commodity. Alvin Gouldner suggests in The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology that our entire society has fallen victim, ideologically speaking, to the "consciousness industry."⁸ This industry, dominated by visual media, shapes our world view, our fundamental values, our visions not only of how life is, but also of how it should or should not be. There are two ways in which this ideological shaping occurs. First, the industry may present information or images which highlight certain behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, practices. The power and/or frequency of such images may do as much to create or reinforce such behaviors, attitudes, beliefs and practices as does actual life experience. For example, if working women are presented in films as achieving happiness only when they finally find a husband and/or have a child, the implicit commendation is that fulfilled women should be wives and mothers. Thus, a particular social value is reinforced. Secondly, the industry may omit certain

⁸Alvin Gouldner, The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 171.

information or images which highlights them by virtue of such omission. That is, the absence of certain information or images fails to create or may even erase certain consciousness. If we fail to see a successful, happy woman in the media who has no husband and no children, the absence of this image reinforces a value, too. This phenomenon is described by Phil Wander in "Cultural Criticism" when he says, "In an historical context with real issues, what does not appear in the media may be more important than what does."⁹ Through overwhelming presence or conspicuous absence, then, our consciousness may be shaped.

The consciousness industry presents competing definitions of the world. Within the context of the culture of critical discourse, we may take the creations of the media as ideologies. A film, for example, creates a report about the world or a social theory that is "both rationally and empirically supported" within the context of the film. As an idea, a film becomes a "contention among competing versions of social reality." Ideologically, the film "generates a frame of reference within which perception takes place, constituting the basis in terms of which some events will be

⁹Dan Nimmo and Keith R. Sanders, eds., Handbook of Political Communication (Beverly Hills: Sage Publishing, 1981), "Cultural Criticism," by Philip Wander, 516.

noticed more or less."¹⁰ To make a film intelligible in a common sense way, the spectator will have to consent to the "dominant modes of subjectivities and [employ] the frames of interpretation provided by the existing ideology."¹¹ To the extent that a society of watchers is exposed to the creations and thus the ideologies of the consciousness industry, the public will be influenced by it, shaped by it, engaged in discourse with it, whether they know it or not.

Observing the lack of research focused on teenagers and film in sociology, communication, film and humanities journals, one might conclude that the subject has little interest for scholars or little value to academic investigation. The emphasis of academic research from 1980 to 1989 on teenagers and the media is the content and/or effects of popular music and television. Only a few authors have handled the subject of film as a cultural artifact which can appropriately be discussed in political terms;¹² even fewer have focused on the teenager. Studies have tended to concentrate on the more pervasive and accessible television.

¹⁰Gouldner, 31, 34.

¹¹Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, Seeing Films Politically, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 19.

¹²See books by Biskind, Elkind, Zavarzadeh, listed in bibliography.

Not only television, but electronic media in general have significantly impacted America's social behavior. In terms of sociological impact, the results of television studies cannot be summarily extended to motion pictures because movies are categorically different from television in terms of accessibility, selectivity and frequency of viewing.¹³ Nevertheless, the inclusion on every major channel of movie hours, the increased subscriptions to cable channels with their rising numbers of movie channels, as well as the skyrocketing video rental industry, have increased the accessibility of film.

Statistics gathered yearly for the Motion Picture Association of America, the industry's trade group document, indicate that the teenage audience is currently declining in economic importance to the film industry:

In 1980, teenagers made up 42 percent of the audience, and studios were catering, almost solely, to them.... In 1989, teenagers composed only 30 percent of the audience. In 1985, an insignificant 14.2 percent of the ticket buyers were over 40. By the end of 1988, 22.2 percent were over 40. Last year [1989] that number crept up further, to 23 percent.¹⁴

This alleged estrangement between Hollywood and the teenager, though, came after the time period of this thesis

¹³Meyrowitz, 251f.

¹⁴Aljean Harmetz, "Hollywood Pays Court to the Young Adult," The New York Times, 13 May 1990, 15.

and, in fact, may be due to cultural change rather than to an actual reduction in the teenage market; that is, the particular movies that teenagers are seeing may have changed. The pervasiveness of electronic media has effectively blurred the line between childhood and adulthood.¹⁵ Because of this social change

[t]he media and merchandisers, too, no longer abide by the unwritten rule that teenagers are a privileged group who require special protection and nurturing. They now see teenagers as fair game for all the arts of persuasion and sexual innuendo once directed only to adult audiences and consumers.¹⁶

Thus it may be that teenagers are attending theaters to see films other than teenpics.¹⁷ In spite of the apparent lack of academic interest in teenagers as a film audience and the reported decline in teenage attendance, adolescents were considered "the dominant audience"¹⁸ as recently as 1988. Further, while there is no definitive way to know the extent

¹⁵Joshua Meyrowitz, No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 226f.

¹⁶David Elkind, All Grown Up & No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis, (Menlo Park: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1984), 4.

¹⁷Some attention might be paid in future research to the video rental industry to determine the categories of consumers as well as the type of film and frequency rental.

¹⁸Doherty, 243.

of the influence of film, film is a significant part of the teenager's life.

That teenagers are likely to be conspicuous consumers of contemporary film is underscored by a survey from The National Assessment of Educational Progress which shows that 63 percent of today's [1983] 17-year-olds say they would choose a movie over reading a book or magazine or watching TV. Author James Michener, concerned with the lack of student interest in reading, suggests that teenagers as "devotees of the motion picture" are "having their value systems formed by movies."¹⁹ Supporting Michener, researchers of student behavior agree that movies and television supply young people's role models these days. Because electronic media influence the cultural perceptions and even the social behaviors of audiences, we cannot ignore the ideologies to which teenage audiences are exposed. We may examine films for and about teenagers as specific creations of the film industry to discover what ideas are present, what are absent and what actions are commended.

This thesis inquires into the ways ideology circulates in some of the "teenpics" of the 1980s by examining selected films, describing the "realities" presented, and interpreting

¹⁹Marvin Stone, "Movies and TV-Good or Bad?", U.S. News and World Report, 31 October 1983, 92.

the ideological aspects of those "realities," including (but not limited to) representations of issues of technology, family, gender roles, authority, and class. The method used to explore the ideologies in the film is loosely based on the idea of "renarration" set forth by critical theorist Mas'ud Zavarzadeh. Zavarzadeh suggests that while the "actual" world exists, it is made "real" through ideological constructs. For example, a child is born as an "actual" male or female, but only through its subsequent adoption of and shaping by the dominant cultural ideologies does its "maleness" or "femaleness" become "real." Such ideological intervention constitutes all that is "real" in our culture. As a cultural artifact, film presents a story that can be understood primarily through the application of dominant ideologies. By intervening in the automatic assumptions of meaning that come when a film is viewed through the filter of dominant ideologies, a critic may destabilize the obvious, superficial "meaning" of the film.²⁰ The discussion of each film in this thesis, then, will be accomplished by critical mediation of what is ideologically visible; that is, alternate interpretations of what the story "means" will be offered as each film is analyzed.

²⁰Zavarzadeh, 22ff.

As a descriptive and interpretive study, this thesis will not be concerned with the actual effects of these films on their audiences, although a case could be made that, because socialization is fundamental to their stage of development, teens attending films are more likely to be influenced by them than are adults. However, that the teenage audience is more or less susceptible to motion picture reality than any other audience is not relevant to this particular investigation.

The films chosen as exemplars of teen films during the 1980s are Wargames (1983), Sixteen Candles (1984), Back to the Future, (1985), and Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986). One obvious consideration in the choice of films was the date of release: the film had to be released during the years 1980 through 1989. Since this project was actually begun at the end of that time period, the ten-year span offered the potential for analyzing films within an historical context. The second criterion of film selection, that the main character(s) is a teenager, specifically, a high school student, was established with the idea that such films would have greater appeal for a teenage audience and could more readily be examined in the actual political and social context of the teenage experience in the 1980s. The third criterion of film selection was that the film be listed as one of the top ten grossing films for any year in the

1980s.²¹ By using this standard, we may infer large numbers of viewers. To some extent, these three criteria limit the available choices. For the years 1980 and 1981, as well as 1987 through 1989, there were no films meeting criteria two and three. Among the films which met the first three criteria, none had a female protagonist.²² Thus, Sixteen Candles necessitated the addition of a fourth criterion so that gender issues might be more thoroughly explored: the film was deemed important to this thesis for special reasons.

²¹Premiere, November, 1989.

²²Ibid.

CHAPTER II
CONTEXT OF THE 1980s

To understand better the teenpic of the eighties as a cultural product, it is important to examine the cultural milieu out of which these films emerged. Philip Wander emphasizes the importance of cultural context to the cultural critic, telling us that culture is not "an isolated, refined, or politically innocent activity." We must ask ourselves, rather, "What does the product have to say in context?" Further, Wander continues,

The decision about whether or not to place cultural products or the medium through which they are communicated into an historical context is not determined by, nor does it depend upon, the intent of the creator (writer, actor, producer, newspaper owner, or network executive). It is determined by the degree to which the juxtaposition of products with objective conditions or existing conflicts raises important issues [my emphasis].²³

In 1980, the door to the American mind slammed shut, and behind that door the marriage of media entertainment and politics was consummated. This incestuous mating resulted in the election of former actor Ronald Reagan to the Presidency.

²³Wander, "Cultural Criticism," 513.

The American public, in a show of bravado that he was more than an actor, re-elected Reagan in 1984, although his administration was fraught with an ethical carelessness that had rarely been witnessed in modern history. The 1980s were the Reagan years. Paul Berman describes the hallmarks of Reaganism ("the prevailing ideas and policies of the American 80's") as

laissez-faire and supply side economics, diminished social welfare, diminished concern for the rights of minorities, militarism, anti-communist bombast, religion (especially fundamentalism), cultural conservatism and a populist tolerance of such tendencies as the anti-Darwin movement in education.²⁴

A list of buzzwords popular in the 1980s gives us some hints regarding the concerns of American society during that time: glasnost, perestroika, Reaganomics, acid rain, yuppie, junk bonds, quality time, floppy disks, the information age. Additional descriptive terms might include the Age of Greed, AIDS, ATM's, VCR's, CD's, PC's, fax, rap, DINK's and latchkey kids.²⁵ A broad description of American culture in the 1980s includes four areas of examination: economic policies, family, technology, and U.S.-U.S.S.R. relations.

²⁴Paul Berman in "The American 80's: Disaster or Triumph?: A Symposium," Commentary 90 (September 1990), 20.

²⁵Flyer from The College Board.

Commenting on American culture in the 1980s, political historians, politicians, and scholars disagree on the fine points of fiscal responsibility and the causes of the immense social stratification that divided America during the Reagan years.²⁶ Still, it is clear that underpinning the culture of the 1980s was the government's economic policy and the subsequent impact of that policy on the society. The effects of economic policy on the rich and the poor are problematic. Whether one views the eighties from an economic standpoint as a good decade or a bad one depends exactly on that--one's economic standpoint.²⁷ U.S. News & World Report draws a bleak picture indicating that

the ranks of the hyper-poor are vast and remain at near-record levels seven years into an economic recovery. In 1989, 12 million people--1 out of every 20 Americans--lived below half the poverty line, an increase of nearly 45 percent from 1979, when unemployment was roughly the same as today.²⁸

Bradley University Fellow Charles Murray disagrees with this negative point of view, writing,

²⁶The controversy, of course, is embedded in ideology. Leftist analysis draws certain conclusions, while conservative analysis concludes otherwise.

²⁷Paul Starr in "The American 80's: Disaster or Triumph?: A Symposium," Commentary 90 (September 1990), 32.

²⁸David Whitman, "The Rise of the 'Hyper-Poor' in the 1980s," U.S. News and World Report, 15 October 1990, 40-41.

it cannot be argued that during the Reagan years the poor got poorer or even that working-class households got poorer...the big change occurred in the income brackets from \$50,00 on up, which increased from 15.8 percent of households to 20.8 percent. This translates into a remarkable 6.3 million new households who moved above the \$50,000 level during the Reagan years. It seems reasonable to infer that this newly prosperous group contributed to an atmosphere in which people seemed to be unusually preoccupied with material possessions.²⁹

John Taylor points out that our culture became focused on the central tenet that money is good:

If culture can be described as the accumulation of images, associations and ideas that express a society's values and sensibility at a given time, the United States in the eighties produced a genuine money culture. At its center was the belief that the accumulation of wealth is morally and even spiritually virtuous....Money came to be regarded unabashedly as an emblem of accomplishment and prowess and even, to some, a sign of God's blessing.³⁰

Summarizing, Art Levine suggests that the popular Michelob advertising slogan "You can have it all," became "a lifestyle that would dominate the decade."³¹

The combined cultural force of the traditional American value of individualism with the 1980s value of affluence

²⁹Charles Murray in "The American 80's: Disaster or Triumph?: A Symposium," Commentary 90 (September 1990) 21.

³⁰John Taylor, Circus of Ambition. The Culture of Wealth and Power in the Eighties (New York: Warner Books, 1989) 4-5.

³¹Art Levine, U.S. News & World Report, 25 December 1989/1 January 1990, n.p.

created a new role model in corporate America. Where once the value had been for the secure employment of a company man or functionary loyally shuffling papers or, like Willie Loman, working a territory until it was time to retire, the new hero was "self-propelled and blatantly self-interested, and he approached what he did as if it were the Big Game and he were the quarterback. He had strategies and tactics."³² In her book The Postponed Generation, Susan Littwin describes the archetype of the hero of the eighties:

Bill Gates [is] chairman and co-founder of Microsoft, a computer software company whose 1984 revenues, according to Time, were 100 million dollars. Time also estimates Gates' personal worth at 100 million and tells us he has a \$750,000 home with a 30-foot indoor swimming pool and a view of Lake Washington. Gates is 28 years old. [He is] independent, even eccentric, getting rich on his own.³³

Since the focus of the decade was individual economic success, it is not surprising that "the attitudes and values of the 1982 [college] freshmen showed a greater degree of materialism and less altruism and social concern than those of any previous entering class."³⁴

³²Susan Littwin, The Postponed Generation, (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1986) 191-192.

³³Ibid., 192.

³⁴Ibid., 101.

Being an active participant in the workforce became a priority for women as well as men. Socially, the trend away from family which began in the 1950s when women began working regularly reached a near apex in the 1980s. Because more American women were working, not only as a supplementary labor force, but often as heads of households, gender roles were changing at high speed, seriously impacting the traditional family unit. In 1950, 28 percent of married women with children between six and seventeen worked outside the home; in 1986, it had risen to 68 percent. In 1950, 23 percent of married women with children under six worked. By 1986, it had grown to 54 percent.³⁵ The increasing number of women working, suggests Arlie Hochschild, creates new cultural images:

Problems between husbands and wives, problems which seem 'individual' and 'marital' are often individual experiences of powerful economic and cultural shock waves that are not caused by one person or two. Quarrels that erupt...result mainly from a friction between faster-changing women and slower-changing men, rates of change which themselves result from the different rates at which the industrial economy has drawn men and women into itself.³⁶

³⁵Arlie Hochschild, The Second Shift (New York: Avon Books, 1989) 2.

³⁶Ibid., 11

By March of 1984, not only was there was one divorce for every two marriages, but the marriage rate dropped slightly between March 1983 and March 1984.³⁷ Littwin, suggesting that the move away from marriage had become a virtual trend by 1986, observed that

we are shifting undeniably and inexorably from a family-oriented society to a society of individuals. It's a shift clearly reflected in the marketplace—in the Lean Cuisine dinners...health spas, singles bars, Club Med trips and 'adult' condos.³⁸

The trend which Littwin describes is no doubt responsible for the entry into our language of the eighties of terms like "DINK"--double income, no kids. Furthermore, this trend away from traditional family seems likely to continue:

According to Bureau of the Census figures, married couples with children constituted only 30.2 percent of households in the country in 1981. By 1990, demographers project that the percentage will drop to 25.8 percent. Similarly, the share of married couple households is expected to drop from almost 60 percent in 1981 to 55 percent in 1990. The types of households expected to increase most rapidly through the end of this decade are the unmarried couple and the single person living alone.³⁹

³⁷Littwin, 218.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid., 215.

The marketplace, too, was experiencing significant change. Employment opportunities shifted radically from manufacturing to services and retail trade.

In 1979, American manufacturing firms employed just over 21 million workers. By the time the 1981-82 recession ended, 18.2 million were left. Today, after nearly eight years of recovery and expansion, there are just 19.1 million. This makes the 1980s the first decade since the Industrial Revolution in which the number of Americans working in manufacturing has fallen.⁴⁰

Not only did the number of traditional manufacturing jobs decline and many industries relocate their manufacturing departments overseas, new additions to the work force affected joblessness. According to the Census Bureau, Asians, who make up less than two percent of the nation's population, were the fastest-growing American ethnic group in the 1970s. This influx of Asians which began with the refugees of the Vietnam era expanded after the liberalization of immigration policy to include voluntary immigrants from Southeast Asia and, to a lesser degree, from China and South Korea. Often the newcomers competed with black, white, and Hispanic urban workers for jobs.⁴¹

⁴⁰Benjamin M. Friedman, "Reagan Lives! (Reagan's Economic Legacy)," New York Review of Books, 20 December 1990, 30.

⁴¹Leslie Dunbar, ed., What Has Happened to Blacks, Hispanics, American Indians, & Other Minorities in the Eighties (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 97.

To compound the employment problem, new industries grew which required greater skills. Computer technology was the fastest growing industry from 1979 to 1989, increasing the number of employees in computer and data-processing services by a whopping 181.9 percent.⁴² Every bank, library, grocery store, college registration, and sweepstakes game operated on some variation of microchip technology. Public elementary and secondary schools began using computers. While millions of Americans were already illiterate by traditional standards, the demand for an additional literacy came into being which schools became responsible for teaching--computer-literacy.

This domination of technology was brightly reflected in the nation's enthusiasm for projects that seemed to underwrite the future, a future, which political analyst Garry Wills describes as "a thrilling show and source of vicarious power--moon shots, laser demonstrations, and a 'space shield.' We have seen the future, and it is Disneyland."⁴³ The government's agenda emphasized its belief in a techno-

⁴²Lois M. Plunkert, "Job Growth and Industry Shifts in the 1980's," Monthly Labor Review, September 1990, 10.

⁴³Garry Wills, Reagan's America (New York: Penguin Books, 1987) 426.

logical solution to everything through the development of complex weapons systems:

In military buying, a desire to put too many eggs in one basket has led to the invention of all-purpose weapons that are too sophisticated for easy use or repair...The same tendency was manifested in the space program, where the shuttle was designed to do in combination things that were better done separately--to carry humans aloft, act as a delivery system for business 'payloads,' carry on scientific research and perform military duties.⁴⁴

In the area of military defense, hopefulness about the future was also grounded in technology. Reagan spent

a great deal on future possibilities of control (especially from space), prodigally buying weapons whose mere purchase insured (he told us) that they would never be used.⁴⁵

The ownership of the big guns was an apparent deterrent to the "Red Peril." The "Red Peril," however, hardly needed to be deterred from an assault it was simply too weak to make. Perestroika, the Soviet economic "restructuring," and glasnost, a kinder, gentler Soviet policy, led political optimists to conclude that the USSR was in serious decline. Nevertheless, protection of the United States from without rose to monumental proportions, while the destruction of the country from within continued unabated. However glorious our technological future may have seemed, teenagers in the 1980s

⁴⁴Ibid., 425.

⁴⁵Ibid., 424.

confronted a much more complex society and a much more complex set of expectations than their historical counterparts.

The rise in technology produced a subsequent decrease in the availability of low or unskilled jobs and, when combined with myriad social ills, had primarily harmful effects. A study by the Vocational Foundation in New York explains the rise of a new form of discrimination:

In place of the bigotry of race has arisen a new bigotry of schooling. This policy is characterized by a worship of credentials...that blocks every route to the ladder up. Each year...the ante is raised: first, a high school diploma, then a special test, then a further degree....This system ... exalts the assets of the advantaged classes--schooling, testing, computing--that are often irrelevant to productivity in most jobs.⁴⁶

The eighties vision of the future, then, depended extensively, if not exclusively, on the education of its youth, but only in designated subject areas. Government's increasing preoccupation with competition, economic with Japan and military with the USSR, led to an attack on American liberal arts education. In what must be considered true dramatic irony, budgets for American education were slashed while, simultaneously, schools were chastised soundly for not keeping up with the Jonesawas. Liberal arts took the

⁴⁶Bernard Lefkowitz, Tough Change, (New York: Free Press, 1987) 239.

brunt of the blows. Science and math requirements increased while drama, speech and English electives dwindled or were cut completely as unnecessary frills. Apple computer insinuated its way into the schools engendering a fervor that elevated technology from a tool to a goal and finally to an essential of life. The home computer and VCR became as fundamental to a family's social status as a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage. Unfortunately, youth's actual education was limited at best:

The proportion of all students who graduate from high school dropped from 77 percent in 1972 to 74 percent in 1983, reversing a 100 year trend toward higher rates of school completion. One in every four students who enrolls in ninth grade leaves school before graduation.⁴⁷

Added to this brew of high drop-out rates and bigotry of schooling, the reality of employment statistics for black youth, makes the future, for some, quite toxic. In November 1985, "white high school dropouts had a 23 percent unemployment rate, while black graduates had a 37.5 percent rate."⁴⁸ Two months later, in January 1986, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that "the unemployment rate of black

⁴⁷Ibid., 96.

⁴⁸Ibid., 225.

teenagers was 41.9 percent as against the white teen unemployment rate of 14.9 percent."⁴⁹

Reagan's policy, emphasizing as it did military spending and foreign affairs, did little to help solve domestic problems and less to help America's youth:

Social problems...were steadily mounting--homelessness, addiction, AIDS, pollution, the waste of natural resources, the growing economic inequality among the classes....Head Start, one of the few government social programs that worked, was dismantled. Free school lunches were stopped even as the number of children going to school hungry increased. Sex education was minimized even as the number of teenage pregnancies skyrocketed.⁵⁰

Further evidence of the mounting problems which faced teenagers and the lack of adequate policies to aid them was the reported incidence of runaways, homelessness and pregnancy. The Federal government itself estimated that every year there were 730,000 to 1.2 million runaway and homeless children. In 1980 more than half a million babies in the United States were born to teenagers. And not only were adolescents having more babies, they were having them when

⁴⁹Ibid., 239.

⁵⁰Phillip Moffitt, "Goodbye to All That? The Decade of Glitz May Have Ended, but the Maladies Linger On," Esquire, January 1990, 132.

they were younger. In 1982, girls fourteen or younger gave birth to 10,000 babies.⁵¹

The actual circumstances of the 1980s were rarely depicted in teen films. Adolescence and Youth, a 1984 textbook of adolescent psychology, indicates that teens' concerns with growing up seemed, in the main, to be the same as those recognized in the 1950s. Briefly, the issues which dominate adolescence include biological changes, intelligence and cognitive development, moral development, family relationships, social relationships including sexuality and peer interactions, drugs, school, work, and, when something is missing, alienation and delinquency or even psychological and psychophysiological disturbances.⁵² Although core socio-psychological issues have stayed the same, there are critical differences between the depiction of teenagers from the 1950s to the depictions of the 1980s. The changes certainly reflect the changing society, but what is represented? By critically examining specific films of the 1980s, we may discover those gaps between actuality and film reality which lend themselves to the endorsement or negation of particular ideologies.

⁵¹Lefkowitz, 7,15.

⁵²John Janeway Conger and Anne C. Petersen, Adolescence and Youth, (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), vii-x.

CHAPTER III

TECHNOTEENS, WAR, ETHICS

That "war is hell" has been ably demonstrated in films from Gone With the Wind to Platoon. These films, though, were limited by the reality of conventional warfare. Only in science fiction were we able to see the grotesque possibilities of man's war machine and the values inherent in a culture which supports the building of such destructive force. Anti-war enthusiasts have continually pointed out the simple truth that "War is not healthy for children and other living things," but, in the eighties, powerful, fanciful technology to enhance war was available, evident in Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, no doubt intentionally nicknamed after the fantasy adventure film, Star Wars. Further, the United States, still suffering the prolonged embarrassment of its military excursion into Vietnam, began to seek success in military expansion. This combination of America's political priorities and her technological capabilities made the fantasy a virtual reality. Control of technology did not belong solely to the government, however. That influx of computer technology into the schools and subsequently the homes made children controllers of technology as well. More often than not, children's use of

computer games as a pasttime made them far more computer literate than their parents or other adults. Unfortunately, technology was still expensive, so many times access to computer programs was through illegal means. Often, "hackers" were less motivated by greed than by the challenge of "winning the game" by getting past locks and escaping with the treasure stored in a computer other than their own. Having acquired the technological expertise so essential to success in the eighties, the technoteen rose to power.

Wargames, a 1983 film directed by John Badham, tells the story of David Lightman (Matthew Broderick, a teen celebrity), an underachieving teenage computer hacker who in his singular search for more challenging video games to play nearly triggers World War III by accidentally tapping into a government computer. A thin subplot reveals what we already knew: love can be found in any dedicated search for something else. Ideologically, the film says much about humans and technology, and suggests that impetuous youth, because of their youth, should be given a better chance at life than we adults are currently offering and that, ultimately, they are the ones who possess the power to save us from ourselves.

Adults control the world in which wargames are played for real and from the opening scene, we are reminded that both humans and machines are fallible. As the film opens, two soldiers in top security positions, as evidenced by their

flashing special cards at a one-way mirror to gain entrance to locked, bolted, hydraulically sealed doors, arrive to take their turn at guard duty. One grumbles to the other that they are late, but overshadowing their lack of punctuality is their topic of conversation: sensemilla, a potent marijuana hybrid. One soldier speaks of the superior plants his girlfriend grew by chanting. Observing the men seated at their work stations, we learn that machinery, too, is fallible. An emergency light comes on, warning of impending attack. However, the senior officer calmly suggests to the soldier that he just tap on it. The soldier does so, and the light goes off, apparently only a false alarm. The crux of the film lies in its disjunctive implications that soldiers in high security, high responsibility positions are at risk from drug involvement and that the high technology governing the war machine may malfunction. Which will endanger us more, the fallibility of men, or, machines?

As this first scene continues, we are provided with a clue to the answer. When a second warning, a message in code, arrives and is translated, we learn that the launching of missiles is to begin. Apparently, this is no drill. We are invited to experience step-by-step the birth of the nuclear holocaust which, it appears, will start in a sterile, locked room filled with electronic equipment manned by two guys who have at least a passing familiarity with marijuana.

(How recent their indulgence, if any, we cannot know.) Yet, all is not lost. With the countdown running, clearly displayed in all its digital glory, one man hesitates. He tries to call to get verification that this launch has been initiated based on correct information. His partner, in a mechanical tone, tells him, "That is not the correct procedure." The dubious soldier's response gives us the hope we need that something can save us from ourselves and that, ironically, that something will be the human element, fallible and intelligent. "Screw the procedure," he says, "I want somebody on the phone before I kill twenty million people." The partner, however, is a more efficient, controlled part of the war machine. Seeing that standard operating procedures are not being followed, he aims a gun at his weaker (read human) colleague. This machine-like behavior, then, ends any hope we may have for survival. Who, we wonder, will win?

The classic conflict of conventional man versus high-tech man and his machines provides the underpinning for the ideological battle represented in the second scene. We are taken deep into Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado, where NORAD, a strategic defense center, code name: Crystal Palace, has been established to play war games, simulations of real wartime situations like we saw in the first scene. The senior officer was not shot for failing to follow procedures because

this scenario was merely a simulation, but his failure creates extreme controversy among the controlling factions. We are introduced to the representatives of ideologies as they debate the results of this particular simulation.

Opening the debate, the technological expert, McKittrick (Dabney Coleman), argues against human beings, informing us that across the nation, in that test, twenty-two percent of designated personnel failed to launch their missiles. (How can one conduct a decent war if people won't launch their missiles?) General Berringer (John Wood), representing the professional soldier, stereotyped as overweight, uniformed and Southern, defends convention, the Soldier. He suggests that perhaps it is only the process of selecting and placing men who have to kill which is faulty. He wants the men at their posts, but he wants to make sure they are capable of carrying out their jobs. His solution is to reevaluate the psychological screening. McKittrick, the expert, on the other hand, is all science and technology, a techno-rebel fighting against the tradition of a military in which decisions are made by men. The computer he has helped design, War Operations Planned Response, the WOPR, can fight the last war by itself. It can choose targets, launch missiles, calculate the losses. In this final crusade, Technology is the savior and McKittrick, its disciple. He wants to "take the men out of the loop." He substantiates his argument with statistics.

Time is too short for humans to make decisions, only twenty-three minutes from warning of attack to impact and only six minutes with a submarine launch. His preference is to replace the men with electronic relays, relays unencumbered with values or emotion. McKittrick's solution is to "keep control here at the top where it belongs." Thus, in the opening segment we are shown a metaphor for the world adults have created, a headquarters of secret operations preoccupied with the destruction of the world, inaccessible to the uninitiated, where neither the common man nor his children have a place.

For an in-depth profile of how such a man as McKittrick might develop we need only look at the movie's protagonist, David Lightman. Like McKittrick, David is a disciple of Technology. We are introduced to David ensconced in a video arcade, intensely involved in a computer video game. He turns the game over to someone else and leaves for school. Presumably, Lightman's addiction is such that, like adults with their coffee, he must indulge it first thing in the morning. As we move with David into the school setting, we see that he has little respect for conventional values and their manifestations. While McKittrick rejects conventional military values, David has an extremely cavalier attitude toward traditional education. In traditional education, punctuality is valued; David arrives late. In traditional

education, good grades are valued; the teacher hands back David's test upon which is circled a big "F." Later, David's contempt for authority is highlighted when the teacher, attempting to stimulate a discussion about mitosis, asks, "Who first suggested the idea of reproduction without sex?" The rowdy reaction of the class seems to be precipitated by David so the teacher, in a traditional move to regain classroom control by embarrassing the student, asks him to answer the question. David's reply, fearless, defiant, hacks adult authority off at the knees: "Your wife?" In a feeble show of power, the teacher sends David to the office.

The teacher, continuing his review of the test says, in a comment which we understand may apply to David as well as to the subject at hand, "Question Four: In the history of science, novel and innovative concepts occasionally arise from sudden left-field inspiration." What we are given to believe from this remark is that while David may not be performing well based on conventional standards, we should not ignore his potential for ingenious inspiration. Waiting in the principal's office, David's inspiration is clear. He knows where the password for the school computer is and steals it, presumably to access the computer to change his grades.

The idea that a student might go to such lengths to create a better report card is not science-fiction. In 1987,

at Homestead High School, located in Sunnyvale, a student did exactly that. He broke into the computer, altering records. He was caught, but the question is raised nevertheless. What has happened to ethics? Why is getting the grade any way possible more important than learning, or earning?

David's contempt for, or indifference to, conventional systems is shown in several ways. The first is his rejection of the traditional model of education. David represents the new young, children of the children of the sixties. He is affluent, possessing his own phone and inordinate amounts of computer equipment. He and his parents have high expectations. Exacerbating his sense of entitlement is his belief that he has infinite choice. David studies what he likes, ignoring what society dictates he learn. He considers himself exempt from conventional mores. When his computer is automatically dialing numbers in a search for the Protovision computer from which David intends to steal the games, Jennifer, David's love interest, asks, "Isn't that expensive?" David's ungrammatical reply exemplifies his attitude toward convention: "There's ways around that." Recognizing the implications for consequences, Jennifer suggests, "You can go to jail for that." David's final response typifies his confidence in his own power, "Only if you're over 18." Children, it appears, need not fear punishment for either illegal or immoral acts.

That some students fear punishment or possess ethical standards precluding their abuse of technological power to break into a school's computer system and change grades is a possibility hinted at when Jennifer balks at his changing her grade. "You can't do that," she says. She makes him restore the original grade, and, apparently offended by the consideration of immoral behavior, she leaves. (Interestingly, they are alone in the house, in his bedroom, and cheating with the computer is the extent of immoral behavior.) Her actions may lead us to believe that moral standards are alive and well and living in the hearts of teenage girls, but our optimism would be short lived. The next day she tells David that she was being silly and that he should change the grade. David, who apparently knew more than we did about the hearts of teenage girls, tells her that he already changed it. After discovering that he has changed her grade to an "A", she looks at him with new interest thus lending credence to Henry Kissinger's frequently quoted assertion that power is the ultimate aphrodisiac. The power to control technology may be the aphrodisiac of the 1980s, and, according to this film, even the master key to the kingdom.

While traditionally the adolescent subculture maintains an order separate from adult culture, the technoteen is removed even further. David's separation from people,

including his own parents, is justified not only by the traditional isolation of adolescents, but by other people's ignorance of technology. David's parents, like the other adults in this film, are presented as fools inhabiting a separate world. In the only scene which involves David's parents, we are shown ineffectual, distant people. While David and his father are seated at the table eating dinner, mother is talking on the phone, oblivious to both. She's discussing a real estate deal. Father holds a piece of buttered bread, rolling his ear of corn in it, presumably as a way to butter the corn. No one talks to David. Rather, he peruses a brochure from a video game company, Protovision, located in Sunnyvale, the real-life heart of the Silicon Valley, birthplace of High Technology. When mother finally does take her place at the table, father complains that the corn is raw. Mother expresses her concern about the danger of the microwave and raves about the health and energy benefits of eating raw vegetables. Their low-tech banality justifies David's escape into his own world. Ironically, David's world, the kingdom of High Technology, is located at the heart of potential destruction and his room, a little piece of techno-Heaven on earth, like NORAD, is mysterious, alien, furnished with state-of-the-art equipment, computers, modems, and speakers, all geared to play games.

The isolation of David's technological world is emphasized when we meet some of its other inhabitants. David goes to some "hackers" for help in interpreting the list he has obtained from the Protovision computer he has invaded searching for video games. These "hackers" are a clandestine order whose knowledge is inaccessible to the uninitiated. Their environment, like the Crystal Palace, like David's room, is filled with technostuff. In terms of appearance, the hackers we meet have the archetypical flaws in appearance and behavior that put them further outside the traditional social interactions. One of the hackers is overweight, yet capable of conversing with David in a "normal" way, the other is a stereotypic, technoteen "nerd." He is unattractive, speaks in a nasal tone and wears thick glasses. In addition, he is extremely intuitive regarding matters computer, but woefully inept as a social being. He immediately recognizes David's list of games, including "Falken's Maze," "Fighter Combat" and "Global Thermonuclear War," as having military origins. When his partner begins to explain to David how to use the "backdoor" to get into the program, the nerd protests: "Don't give our secrets away in front of her," he whines, suspiciously eyeing Jennifer. His partner reminds him that everyone knows about backdoors anyway and cues him that his social behavior is "rude and insensitive." That certain technology is inaccessible is clear when the older

hacker explains that there is always a password into a program that only the designer knows. It is the nerd who hands the key to David: "The first game on the list. Go right through Falken's Maze." Nowhere in this dialogue does any of them question his right to break into a computer program which has already been illegally accessed. Rather, the issue is merely a puzzle to be solved and questions of ownership seem irrelevant. For the new young, entitlement is a given. If one has the tools and skills to access computer knowledge, one is entitled to claim it all.

Earnestly, David begins to solve the puzzle. Falken's Maze was designed by computer whiz Stephen Falken. We are shown scenes of David in the library, using microfilm and requesting materials. The flashes of different scenes indicate a significant passage of time. What shall we make of the stark contrast between David's failure to perform as a student in his science class and his diligent search for knowledge of Falken? David is good at what he likes and traditional education is not it. David, the archetype of the technoteen has apotheosized technology in exactly the same way as has McKittrick, his adult counterpart. David is the faithful novice, destined to become a high priest of technology, possessing the inaccessible knowledge to control the doomsday machines, but, like McKittrick, he suffers from shortsightedness. Inherent in his use of technology is his

abuse of it in treating it merely as a means to an end. He fails to see that his actions, in terms of technology, are severed from responsibility and morality, whether one is acquiring video games to play, making false airline reservations, changing grades, or eliminating the human factor in the decision to launch World War Three.

David's initiation rite into the priesthood of Technology consists of his overcoming obstacles until he becomes fully empowered. The first obstacle is discovering the password which will enable him to illegally access the computer games he wants. In his search, David stumbles onto a video about Falken, a high priest of computers who has created a computer capable of learning. The comments David and Jennifer make while watching the video make clear these teens' view of the gap between youth and age. Regarding Falken, whom the computer maintains was deceased in 1973, Jennifer says, "He wasn't very old."

David counters, "He was pretty old--he was 41."

Jennifer, convinced, replies, "Oh, yeah? That's old." It is perhaps this view of Falken's age combined with the information that his child Joshua was killed at a very young age that gives David the password, simple, indicative of Falken's old-fashioned values. With Jennifer at his side, David's empowerment increases as he successfully breaks into the computer with the password "Joshua" and begins playing

the game Global Thermonuclear War, nuking cities ("Killer," Jennifer comments approvingly.), drinking Tab and eating snacks, the innocent empowered, distant from and oblivious to the consequences of his own actions.

That David's empowerment is complete appears certain when his parents later call him downstairs to congratulate him on his good grades, grades, we remember, that he falsified. But as his parents prattle, David tunes them out listening instead to a newscast from the television telling of the quandary the Pentagon was in earlier that day when their monitors showed an all-out attack by the Soviets which, fortunately, turned out to be a false alarm. Investigation was continuing. David, realizing the connection between his computer game playing and the events in Washington, attempts to disengage his computer. But by now, Joshua, the computer which is designed to learn, has learned. Joshua continues to call David, requesting that he continue to play the game, but both David and we realize that the machine cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality. Worse yet, when David's fantasy game shows up as a real attack on the monitors at the Crystal Palace, the government mistakes fantasy for reality. At this point, David's games no longer parallel the government's games, but rather become the same. The government's real response to the fantasy may launch World War Three. For the first time in this film, David is confronted with a potential

barrier to his success, a genuine negative consequence to his misuse of his power.

David appears fallible as he is caught by Federal agents who handcuff him, recite his Miranda rights, and take him to headquarters. Ultimately, David is confronted by Berringer, McKittrick, and other government officials. All are livid that they are the victims of a "high school prank." We may understand this anger to be the result of an invasion by an infidel, a commoner, an outsider who is all the more alien for his being a mere teenager. McKittrick refuses to empower David by recognizing his skill or ability. "No way," he says, "that a high school punk can put a dime into a telephone and break into our system. He's got to be working with somebody else. He's got to be." But we in the audience know better and so, when an agent begins to describe a particular type of person, "He does fit the profile perfectly. He's intelligent, but an underachiever, alienated from his parents, has few friends...", we assume he is describing a true technoteen, not the traitor he means: "--a classic case for recruitment by the Soviets," he finishes. What we realize from this exchange with McKittrick and the agent is that, as a technoteen, David is empowered not only to betray the country, but to destroy it completely. The true horror is not that David has or will betray or destroy

the country, but rather that he may destroy the entire planet. And only by accident.

But, as in all myths, David's power is presented as a double-edged sword which can be used for good or ill. To this point we have seen David's use of technology as primarily abusive, enabling him to lie, cheat and steal. What consequence might be great enough to teach David to use his power properly? This film suggests that the impending obliteration of the planet might be sufficient to teach David to abandon self-interest for the public interest. David continues to use his power incorrectly to access the computer again and to escape from government officials, but we see this use as acceptable because it leads to a good end. No one else has all the parts to the puzzle nor the ability to put it together except David. Left alone in an office after his capture, David again accesses the computer illegally, an act all the more arrogant for its occurring inside government headquarters under circumstances which would bring David even more severe consequences. Once in the computer, David validates the seriousness of the "game" with Joshua: "Are you still playing the game?" After Joshua's affirmative response, David asks, "Is this a game or is this real?" With astounding accuracy, the message hits home: "What's the difference?" Indeed, neither the computer nor the adults in charge realize the difference. From the computer, David

discovers that Falken is still alive, a techno-resurrection of sorts, and obtains his address. Later, after David is imprisoned in a room in the Crystal Palace, he uses his technoability to escape. Here we are to believe that David's genius is such that he can use a tape recorder and surgical clamp to bypass an electronic high-security system. Yet for someone who has already invaded the computer-that-controls-the-world, this, by comparison, is small potatoes.

David subsequently reunites with Jennifer and together they find Falken. Falken is a dropout from the priesthood of Technology. He invented the ultimate computer, the computer that learns, the computer that was put to use planning doomsday scenarios, and then he left. As progenitor of Joshua, but not endorser of the use to which his child (He named the computer after his son Joshua who had been killed with his mother in an accident.) has been put, Falken has returned to the simple life, but has not been able to erase completely his connections to the technological world. Falken, too, can only be accessed through the use of the password. Turning away, he refuses to speak with David and Jennifer and tells them to leave his island until David says, "I came about Joshua." Responding like the computer, Falken invites David in. In his continuing attempt to right the wrong he has done, David suggests to Falken that he is obligated to return to the outside world and save it. In

this sense, Falken takes on the characteristics of a savior. He who was dead has an obligation, it would appear, to rise again and save the world. Falken resists the task, arguing that it is time for the end of mankind. Obsessed with the study of dinosaurs, Falken considers that they are a perfect example of Nature's ability to know when to give up. Like the social philosopher, Herbert Spencer, Falken appears convinced that any interference in the natural development of society is completely unwarranted. Intensifying his offensive, David resorts to creating guilt. "If Joshua starts a nuclear attack," he says, "It will be your fault." Once again David's actions are separated from their consequences. Apparently, David's kid crime of accidental use of technology precipitating the current crisis is secondary to the adult crime of intentional creation of technology capable of destroying the world. But even the creator abrogates responsibility, reminding us that Joshua is only a product of human creation. Joshua's weakness in game-playing, as it turns out, is the same as that of the adult world, government in particular: "Joshua would never learn futility. There is no way to win--the game is pointless."

Faced with Falken's implacable resignation, David and Jennifer leave, trying to find a way off the island. The last ferry has gone, however, and they must sit for awhile to plan their actions. It is in this planning that we are faced

with the traditional scene of humans confronted with their mortality. What do we regret? What dreams will remain unfulfilled? Often, the answers are profound and touching; here, merely fatuous. Jennifer suggests that since the ferry is gone, they should swim back to the mainland, a distance of only one or two miles. But David, we learn, can't swim. "I always thought I'd have time to learn," he sighs. Her major regret is that she won't be able to be on television with her dance group. Perhaps these losses are not shallow, but merely representative of teen thought. The privileged status of these children who have the luxury of swimming, the chance to appear on television, is emphasized when David, in a final outburst, says, "I wish I didn't know this. I wish I was like everybody else in the world." But clearly, they are not like everyone else and Falken, apparently moved by their youthful plea, swoops out of the sky in a helicopter, picks them up, and joins their cause.

David, Jennifer and Falken, like the cavalry, arrive in the nick of time, just as the Crystal Palace is being sealed shut in preparation for Armeggedon. Falken confronts General Berringer telling him that the attack they are witnessing is merely a "computer-enhanced hallucination." He argues with the utmost faith in humanity, posing questions which have given responses like the litany of a mass.

"Does it make any sense?" he asks, knowing that Berringer and the audience must answer, "No."

"Do you believe you are listening to a machine?"

"Yes."

"Then do the world a favor," he commands Berringer, "and don't act like one." General Berringer, whose overriding belief as a professional soldier is in the men who fight the wars, gives the order to wait. On the monitors of the war room, we witness with the occupants the destruction of major sites across the nation. The war for those of us outside the Crystal Palace would be swift destruction for some, merciless survival for others, but, for those protected in the Palace, war is merely an elaborate display of computer graphics. But, as we knew, Falken was right. An emotional roll call during which men respond from strategic military bases all over the country helps us feel the celebration that we see enacted by the folks in the war room. We sigh with relief as we hear the orders to "Recall the bombers. Stand down the missiles." Our involvement in this near miss distracts us completely from the fact that we ought to be very angry, angry at our country for pursuing policies which separate the decision for war from those who will suffer most from it, and, more immediately, at David Lightman for being such a stupid, selfish child that he could bring us to this point. Our relief is short-lived, however. As the technician tries

to stop the war machine, he discovers that the changes are locked out. The computer, it would seem, has gone mad, and insists on finishing the game. To this end, Joshua tries to find the launch codes to send the missiles anyway.

Everyman's professional soldier, General Berringer, has a simple solution: "Just unplug the goddam' thing."

McKittrick nixes that idea with his technological expertise:

"That won't work. It would interpret a shut down as a destruction of NORAD and automatically launch the missiles."

Neither do they have the time to disarm over one thousand missiles. This dirth of options triggers the inevitable verbal confrontation between the professional soldier whose knowledge springs from earthy, simple, hands-on experience and the expert whose knowledge comes from the rarified, isolated, elite world of academia:

'Mr. McKittrick, after very careful consideration, sir, I've come to the conclusion that your defense system sucks.'

'I don't have to take that from you, you pig-eyed sack of shit.'

'Oh, I was hoping for something a little better than that from you, sir, a man of your education.'

With options clearly limited and The End near, David, nearly forgotten in the hubbub, moves to take control of the situation. At last, the one who got us into it is going to get us out of it. Support for David comes from Berringer, old-fashioned and paternal, who says, "Let the boy in there." David tries to get Joshua to play some other games, but

finally, it comes down to only one, unlisted: TicTacToe. The machine begins to play against itself but always the game ends in a tie. Superimposed over the game are the simulated launches and results, likewise, always the same: Winner: None. In the end, the computer-that-would-be-king learns what no human in the film has learned, the lesson of futility. Says Joshua, "A strange game. The only way to win is not to play. How about a nice game of chess?" At this, McKittrick tousles David's hair and, like the fairytale ending of Hansel and Gretel, they dance about and fall on each other's necks and kiss each other.

Unfortunately, while Wargames addresses the important issue of nuclear war, it avoids commending any solutions with its happily-ever-after ending. Apparently, the filmmakers, in working so hard to develop what is at first glance an anti-war message, neglected to commend any changes in the human or the societal conditions which cause wars in the first place. Clearly, adults are responsible for the world's need to be in any kind of "defense condition." The central character of this film, coming of age in a technological world, is mired in an outdated educational system which does not address the needs of the new young. To change his grade is not cheating, but rather rebelling. David is portrayed as a victim of the very system which nurtures war through mechanization and dehumanization. The potential for a

nuclear blunder is not the fault of the person who was tampering with the system but rather of those who built the system in the first place. The film attempts to place blame on the system, but we are misled. The system is a result of society's values. If the current "establishment" values power and that is bad, what does youth offer us as an alternative?

The technoteen David got us into this mess because of his lack of moral standards and, although catastrophe is avoided, we have no indication that David acquires any moral standards. That David is good at what he likes requires no effort on his part. He needs only act to fulfill his personal desires and all else comes to him. In the end, David doesn't want to save the world, he wants only to preserve his way of life. Through his example we see that it is possible to possess intimate power over mankind's destiny without having any ethical or moral standards, surely a reflection of American government in the 1980s.

CHAPTER IV
PHILOSOPHY, FAMILY, AND FRIENDS

Perhaps the ultimate representation of the eighties' entrepreneurial hero is Ferris Bueller in Ferris Bueller's Day Off [1986].⁵³ This film recounts the adventures of one Ferris Bueller (Matthew Broderick--again) on a day in spring when he decides to cut school, taking with him his girlfriend Sloane and his sycophant Cameron. In the course of his day we are shown Ferris lying to his parents, manipulating his peers and, in general, confounding the Establishment. Yet, for all his immoral behavior, like David Lightman in Wargames, Ferris emerges not only unscathed, but triumphant.

The opening scene establishes Ferris' relationship with his parents. With sounds and expressions that rival Mimi's in La Boheme, Ferris insists to his parents that he must go to school though he is sick. "I want to get into a good college so I can have a fruitful life," he claims in piteous

⁵³Author's note: As an adult and a teacher, I found watching this movie several times to complete this analysis a most painful experience. Ferris Bueller offends me. As an adult, I am offended by his self-aggrandizing self-centered behavior; as a teacher, I am offended by his self-indulgence trying to pass as rebellion.

tones. His doting, naive parents, together in his room, express their concern. They want him to stay in bed and they will check on him. His prototype eighties Mom is "showing houses," but will stop in to make sure Ferris is all right. Dad says, "I'll check on you, too, Pal," suggesting a rapport reminiscent of Robert Young in "Father Knows Best." Only Ferris' sister knows he is lying. Ferris knows she knows and winks at her, saying to her for the benefit of his ignorant parents, "You have your health. Be thankful." In case any of us in the audience missed it, after his parents leave and Ferris announces to the audience, "They bought it," we know, too.

However, it is not enough that Ferris deceives his parents taking advantage of their love, trust and, need we say it, ignorance; Ferris must mock them as well. "One of the worst performances of my career," he crows, "and they never doubted it for a second." Ferris justifies his deception with a question. "How could I possibly be expected to handle school on a day like this?" he asks as the camera pans across a bright, blue sky. The question Ferris asks is no doubt sufficient justification for a teenage audience whose singular voice would respond, "You can't!" And having supported Ferris' actions, the audience becomes privy to the master's secrets. On the screen, superimposed, is the title, "Faking Out Parents," followed by a listing of the steps. In

documentary fashion, Ferris explains the techniques he uses to make his parents believe his illness is real. The last step in the sequence is, while moaning and wailing, to lean over as though in pain and lick the palms of the hands to create clammy hands, "a good non-specific symptom." Ferris' final comment in this scene suggests a second justification: "It's [licking one's palms] a little childish, but then so is high school." Having in one sweep justified his immorality and indicted secondary education, Ferris goes on to give us his world-view, carpe diem, the philosophical underpinning of the film: "Life moves pretty fast--if you don't stop and look around once in awhile, you could miss it." Apparently, for Ferris, school is separate from Life; Life can be celebrated only by non-conformist behavior. Yet, for all this presumed interest in Life, Ferris' criticism of the irrelevance of school smacks of shallow materialism:

I do have a test. That wasn't bullshit. European socialism. I mean, really. What's the point? I'm not European. I don't plan on being European, so who gives a crap if they're socialists? They could be fascist anarchists. It still wouldn't change the fact that I don't own a car.

Clearly, Life is not the world, nor is it historical or political wisdom, rather it is "self." This point is underscored when Ferris, continuing to speak to the audience directly, tells us, "A person shouldn't believe in an 'ism,' he should believe in himself." To a teacher in California, a state which has considered legislation aimed at boosting

self-esteem, Ferris' message seems on the surface to be a positive one. It's only when we see his notion of belief in self manifest that we sense the danger.

Still, it's hard to feel sympathy for the adults in the film except that they're so stupid deceiving them seems merely cruel. When the representative of the bureaucratic Establishment, Mr. Rooney, the dean, calls Ferris' mother to report Ferris' absence, he speaks entirely in clichés. "Wake up and smell the coffee, Mrs. Bueller," he says. "It's a fools' paradise. He [Ferris] is just leading you down the primrose path." Rooney's subsequent behavior elevates Ferris to a super-enemy much like the one Richard Hofstadter describes in "The Paranoid Style in American Politics:"

...This enemy is clearly delineated: he is a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman: sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving. ...He is a free, active, demonic agent....Very often the enemy is held to possess some especially effective source of power: ...he has a new secret for influencing the mind...; he is gaining a stranglehold on the educational system.⁵⁴

Rooney refers to Ferris' power: "He gives good kids bad ideas. He's popular. We've got to catch him." Yet this film does not stop with the paranoid Rooney merely acknowledging Ferris. Rather, we much watch as the insipid

⁵⁴Richard Hofstadter, The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays, (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 31-32.

Rooney makes Ferris a Cause, enabling Rooney himself to project and freely express unacceptable aspects of his own mind.

Rooney is so determined to catch Ferris that he resorts to the same immoral (read criminal) behavior of which he believes Ferris to be guilty. At one point Rooney becomes so incensed with Ferris that Rooney's secretary tells him he reminds her of Dirty Harry. Rooney considers this comment a compliment. Send a maverick to catch a maverick. But as the action unfolds, we see that Rooney is no maverick but rather a pitiful excuse of an educator, adult and man. That Rooney is drawn this way for comic purposes is certain, but what emerges from the conflict of Rooney and Ferris is not so funny. That Rooney has nothing more pressing to accomplish than to catch one student for truancy, a student who is apparently not guilty of drug abuse, gang involvement, or any other criminal activity is patently absurd; that Rooney would engage in an ego-battle with a student, equally so. Yet Rooney goes so far as to break the law in his attempt to catch Ferris. We are to believe that a man with Rooney's job would risk convictions for trespassing and breaking and entering simply to catch a kid who is cutting school. The impact of Rooney's obsession is to elevate Ferris to the same celebrity status assigned him by Ferris' peers.

Aligned with Rooney as the only other person who opposes Ferris is his sister. An atypical teenager in the context of this film, she rejects Ferris' casual attitude toward school. She knows he's conning everyone from the outset and she says so. She tells her parents but they don't believe her. A foil, she serves to underline Ferris' celebrity status with his peers. She is disgusted with the rumor going around the school that Ferris needs an operation. She is asked by a fellow student to contribute to the fund to Save Ferris. In one scene, she catches Rooney in the Bueller house. Not knowing who he is or why he's in her house, she uses swift martial arts kicks to disable Rooney, then calls the police. Ultimately, it is she who is taken to the station for calling in a false report. Once again she has told the truth and been punished. Waiting in the police station, she begins conversing with a delinquent. At first she's rude to him, but eventually they begin to discuss her problem. Regarding Ferris' she says, "Why shouldn't he have to go [to school]? Everyone else does."

Replies the delinquent, "You could ditch."

"I'd get caught."

"So you're pissed off because your brother ditches and doesn't get caught. There's someone you should talk to."

"Ferris Bueller?"

"Yeah....you know him?"

Ferris is such a celebrity that even the delinquent knows of him. When Mrs. Bueller comes to pick up her

daughter, the police give their best wishes to Ferris. That Ferris is the root of his sister's problem is not the case, apparently. She is responsible for her own misery. If she's going to insist on traditional behavior and truth, she's not going to be rewarded. With unprecedented haste, Ferris' sister is converted. By the end of this scene in the police station, she is necking with the delinquent. Leaving the station, she is breathless, giggling, a prototype, a silly teenage girl. No longer an outcast, she transmogrifies into the same female as her mother and Sloane and ends up not as a supporter of truth and Ferris' enemy, but rather a sentimental female and Ferris' ally.

Ferris as celebrity mentor/therapist choreographs the day, demonstrating to teenage audiences everywhere that 1) we teens really are intelligent without school, 2) traditional values and conformity are tedious, and 3) meaningless rebellion is fun.⁵⁵ That teenagers would actually pursue worthwhile activities without benefit of formal education seems to be indicated by Ferris and friends' activities. Free from the bonds of school filled with boring teachers and irrelevant work, what might we see teenagers doing? Do they

⁵⁵For a similar summary of the "half-truths and falsehoods" in teen films see Armond White, "Kidpix," Film Comment, 21, July-August 1985, 9.

go to the homes from which their working parents are absent to have sex? The teenage pregnancy rate in the United States of 96 per 1000 might indicate so. Do they commit crimes?

Every month, secondary schools experience 2.4 million thefts, almost 300,00 assaults and over 100,000 robberies. More 17 to 20 year old males are arrested for virtually every class of crime (including homicide) than males in any other age group.⁵⁶

Do they get high? The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reports, conservatively, that 1.3 million teenagers between the ages of twelve and seventeen have serious drinking problems.⁵⁷ Certainly such actual behaviors are absent from this film. Perhaps only teens of the lower classes resort to such destructive behaviors. This film suggests that rich, white teenagers cut school to enrich their lives. Ferris and friends first go to the Sears building and look at the city. Then they go to a swank restaurant where Ferris tries to con his way in by giving the name of someone who already has reservations. Lest we forget how clever Ferris is, we are shown another situation in which Ferris bests his elders, allowing he and his friends to obtain seating in the restaurant. While watching them eat, I

⁵⁶C.Murphy, "Kids Today," Wilson Quarterly, Autumn 1982; quoted in David Elkind, All Grown Up & No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis, (Menlo Park: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1984) 8.

⁵⁷Elkind, 7.

wondered how they happened to have enough money among them, mere teenagers, to pay for lunch at such an elegant place and, moreover, why they would want to be there in the first place. After lunch, we find the comrades observing a game at Wrigley field. Finished with plebian pursuits, the group goes to the art gallery where we observe over a dozen paintings and sculptures. We see Ferris and friends pondering the art and, at one point, even imitating it. In true postmodern fashion, Ferris and friends become the art. In the final, climactic event of the day, the group gets caught up in a parade. While Sloane and Cameron talk about how terrific Ferris is, Ferris becomes the center of attention in the parade. In the ultimate elevation to celebrity status, Ferris is centered on a float, singing first "Danke Schoen" then "Twist and Shout", while hundreds of people clap, cheer and look on approvingly. Clearly, Ferris brightens up everyone's day and he is rewarded, as it seems he should be, by thunderous applause, the crowd going wild.

The irony of these pursuits is that, though they appear to be designed as a thumbing of the nose to traditional values, it is precisely those traditional values which made such pursuits possible. Throughout the day, we witness the exchange of cash only once, although the activities all cost

money.⁵⁸ Since none of these students apparently is employed, what is the source of their wealth? Does a poor, middle class, or minority student think of going to a swank restaurant or an art museum when he cuts school, or is this behavior to be understood as typical of rich white kids whose lifestyles routinely include such activities? More likely such a depiction is wishful thinking, the way we would like it to be for all students. Ferris and friends acquire a dream car to drive for the day, a car which would not have been available to the poor or middle class. Further, Ferris would not have had access to the electronic equipment, computers, answering machines, synthesizers and recorders which aided in his escape had he been of the struggling, or even working, class. Like the children of the eighties who are drawn to

⁵⁸Interestingly, the money exchanged is a \$5.00 bonus to the Hispanic who parks cars in the parking garage so that he'll take care of Cameron's father's car. Money in hand, the attendant and his friend, also a minority member, take the car joyriding while the soundtrack plays the theme from StarWars. That the film readily stereotypes minorities and shows them to be untrustworthy may be less the issue than the similarity between Ferris and friends and the attendants. The lack of respect afforded the giver of the easy money parallels the lack of respect Ferris and friends have for their parents, also easy givers of money. Ferris cheats his parents and the attendants cheat Ferris, but, unfortunately, neither Ferris nor the attendants are victims of karmic paybacks. It is the long-suffering weenie Cameron who must, in the end, pay for the extra mileage on his father's treasured automobile.

the psychedelia rather than the substance of the sixties, Ferris is privileged youth with all the flash of his position, but none of the finer qualities. That the educated wealthy might be more compassionate for the human condition is merely to be hoped; certainly, Ferris exhibits no such compunctions. In the restaurant, the maitre d', foreign, effeminate and pretentious, refuses Ferris and friends entrance disbelieving Ferris' claim to be "The Sausage King." During the confrontation, Sloane suggests that they should leave, that Ferris is "going too far." Replies Ferris, "You can never go too far. If I'm gonna be busted, it's not gonna be by a guy like that." What characteristic makes the maitre d', "a guy like that" is not clear, but that Ferris is homophobic is at least suspect.

That Ferris has genuine concern for his friends is suspect as well. Ferris' celebrity status may well be the trade-off for close friends of which he appears to have only two: Sloane, his girlfriend, and Cameron, his sycophant. Sloane is typical of the female teenagers in these films. She is pretty, but doesn't really do much. We see her acting frail and crying, using stereotypic female behaviors to "put on" Mr. Rooney about her grandmother's death in order to get out of school to meet Ferris. Later she plays the nurturing female as she rubs Cameron's brow during his brief catatonia. In the end, as Ferris runs home to avoid getting caught by

her parents, we learn Sloane's goal. Watching Ferris, she says, "He's gonna marry me."

Standing in stark contrast to Ferris is Cameron. Where Ferris is nerdy, Cameron is nervous; where Ferris is outspoken, Cameron is silent; where Ferris takes action, Cameron is passive. Ferris seems to regard himself as mentor-cum-therapist to Cameron, but to all appearances he is the Great White Father guiding the ignorant peon. When Ferris calls Cameron, Cameron really is sick. Ferris, however, refuses to leave him alone, ordering Cameron to come over and pick him up. Ferris analyzes the situation: "You're not dying. You just can't think of anything good to do." To the audience, Ferris speaks about Cameron: "If anybody needs a day off, it's Cameron. He's so tight that if you put a lump of coal up his ass in two weeks you'd have a diamond." What, one wonders, is the basis of this friendship? At this point we switch to Cameron, now in his car. "He'll keep calling me," he says, "He'll make me feel guilty." Such a comment seems a more appropriate response to a parent than to a peer. Cameron's anger at himself for being unable to refuse Ferris is evident when he jumps out of the car and heads back to the house. His resistance is short-lived, however, and he returns to the car, cursing, starts it, and goes to answer his master's summons. A subsequent conflict between Cameron and Ferris gives us more insight about their

relationship. Ferris points out Cameron's stupidity when he makes a mistake telling a lie to Mr. Rooney. Cameron becomes angry and Ferris apologizes, but even the apology is a ploy to manipulate Cameron. We are not surprised then when Cameron allows Ferris to take an expensive, classic sportscar that belongs to Cameron's father. That the car is the object of his father's attention, rather than Cameron, at least according to Cameron, justifies such thievery. "Besides," says Ferris about the plan to pick up Sloane, "There's nothing else we can do."

Later Cameron effects a kind of suicide. He appears catatonic at first. Ferris justifies having produced the circumstances which led to Cameron's withdrawal:

I just wanted to give him a good time. He going away to school. He's never been in love and no one's been in love with him. If things don't change for him, he's gonna marry the first girl he lays and she'll treat him like shit because she will have given him what he has built up in his mind as the end all be all of human existence. She won't respect him because you can't respect somebody who kisses your ass; it just doesn't work.

The audience must overlook the fact that these words precisely describe the relationship between Ferris and Cameron. As this speech ends, Cameron tumbles into the pool and sinks to the bottom, metaphorically committing suicide. Ferris jumps in and pulls him out, once again saving and indebting Cameron. Cameron hugs Ferris expressing a sad

truth feebly disguised as a joke: "Ferris Bueller, you're my hero."

Ferris' therapeutic technique obviously works, and, by the end of the story, Cameron is ready to stand on his own. Ferris mistakenly believed the excess miles could be taken off the odometer by letting Cameron's father's car run in reverse. Confronted with the truth, faced with no hope of successful deception, Cameron erupts:

I gotta take a stand. I'm bullshit. I put up with everything. My ol' man pushes me around. I never say anything. But he's not the problem--I'm the problem. I gotta take a stand. I gotta take a stand against him. I am not gonna sit on my ass as the events that affect me unfold to determine the course of my life. I'm gonna take a stand. I'm gonna defend it--right or wrong--I'm gonna defend it. [He kicks car.] Who do you love? You love a car....He'll come home, he'll see what I did, he'll have to deal with me. I don't care....I'm just tired of being afraid....I can't wait to see the look on the bastard's face.

Finally, Cameron's vandalism of the car forces it to roll out of the elevated, glass-encased garage, and crash into the ravine below the garage. If we believe the indications, Cameron has become a man. Lest we doubt, Ferris assures us, "Cameron's gonna be O.K. for the first time in his life." We need only witness the straightened posture, the resolute set of the jaw to know that Cameron has made a successful leap from childhood into manhood. To become a man, Cameron has destroyed his father's treasure. From what myth comes this curious rite of passage? Cameron's discovery

of himself opens with the admission that the difficulty he has with his father is not his father's problem, but rather is a result of his own weakness. From what misguided logic does Cameron conclude that by destroying something important to his father, his father will "relate" to him differently? The stand Cameron takes may appear to be a rejection of materialism, but we do not see him giving up anything material; only destroying another's property. Cameron's rhetoric of confrontation may evoke rowdy support from teenage audiences, but unfortunately Cameron's rebellion lacks foresight. To be sure, he will get the confrontation he demands, but whether he has the inner strength to do real battle with his father is dubious. That his father deserves real battle is equally dubious. Throughout the film, we have little indication that Cameron is oppressed. It isn't until this final scene that we hear how neglected the poor child is, according to him. Having seen his room with its lavish decorations and speaker-phone and his car, we have understood that he is not materially deprived. That he may be emotionally deprived is never developed, unless we assume as amateur psychologists that his puppy-like attachment to Ferris is some kind of parent-love substitute. Without Ferris and the anger of the moment, Cameron is more likely, after a confrontation with his father, to return to his

natural, mild-mannered state, guilty for his actions, disgusted with his own weakness.

Throughout the film, Ferris is lionized by his parents, schoolmates, girlfriend and sycophant. Cameron sums up their view: "As long as I've known him, everything works for him. There's nothin' he can't handle." Standing in opposition to this view, united in a perverse way, are Mr. Rooney and Ferris' sister. Ferris races to beat his parents home from work. There are several close calls, but at last he makes it to his back porch. In the showdown, Ferris' sister locks the door, and this adult viewer was excited thinking he would finally get what he deserved. Mr. Rooney catches Ferris outside. In a final message which indicates that Ferris' sister has made the switch from truth to deception, from intellectual to anti-intellectual, from "them" to "us," she opens the door and greets Ferris as though he has been sick all day. Leaving Mr. Rooney standing with mouth agape, his clothes in shambles, Ferris races up the stairs and is safely tucked in bed when his parents open his bedroom door. They come in with doting expressions, unnaturally solicitous. In the same way that he began the day, Ferris ends it. He deceives his parents, muttering, "Please don't make me stay home again. I want to graduate in June." After they are gone, his mother remarking, "How'd you get to be so sweet" in tones normally reserved for furry baby animals, Ferris once

again speaks to the audience. The speech is significant because "the final speaker articulates the film's ideology."⁵⁹ Ferris repeats his opening message: "Life moves pretty fast. You don't stop and look around once in awhile, you could miss it."

Carpe diem, to seize the day instead of putting all hope in the future, is clearly the message of Ferris Bueller's Day Off. We recognize that the clichéd references to the future, graduation and college are the parents' own words, not Ferris'. By lying to his parents about the importance of the future, Ferris is able to win their sympathy and successfully live for the moment. No consequences are shown in this film. Ferris starts as celebrity con-artist and ends the same way. Sloane begins as a mindless female following Ferris and ends the same way. The sister changes, but her change ultimately leads to the subservience and complicity of the other females in the film. The mother and father also stay mindless and doting. Mister Rooney stays obsessed with Ferris as well. Only Cameron is faced with a real obstacle and a real possibility for change. The change that can be made by Cameron is the only one of any value: improvement of his relationship with his father. But

⁵⁹Peter Biskind, Seeing is Believing, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 40.

since this is not a film about consequences, we abruptly leave Cameron with the wreck of his father's car. Cameron is faced with consequences which are outside the scope of this film. We don't want to see actual consequences, and Ferris Bueller's Day Off shows us that we don't have to. Yet we should not be surprised that Ferris suffers no consequences, for he is no threat to the existing system. Ferris' life is a dead-end. He will not initiate actual rebellion, nor create a new social order. Ultimately, Ferris adopts Establishment values and disappears into the mainstream.

CHAPTER V
MAMMARIES, MENSTRUATION, AND MORALITY

In the eighties' teen films, the male hero dominated. In 1984, though, audiences got a close look at the trials and tribulations of the modern female teenager in the John Hughes' film 16 Candles, starring Molly Ringwald as Samantha Baker. The coming-of-age of the female teenager contrasts sharply with the coming of age of the male teenager. Although Jennifer in Wargames and Sloane in Ferris Bueller's Day Off were only in supporting roles, Samantha as a main character has many similarities. In fact, in spite of their twenty-year age difference, Samantha has many similarities to her predecessors, Gidget and Tammy. Although the appearance of a female as the main character would seem to signpost a story in which females dominate, this is not the case. Ideologically, 16 Candles does not question the patriarchal order, but rather affirms it. From the younger brother, to the freshman "nerd," to the sex-crazed alien, to the romantic male, to the understanding father, we follow the male in his development. At every stage, he dominates. Females, on the other hand, have far fewer options and worthy males will never let them dominate. Samantha is never shown controlling technology and fulfillment for her comes not from rebellious

behavior but rather from assuming a traditional role. In short, she succeeds in dominant ideological terms by submitting to the patriarchal code.

The plot of 16 Candles is simple, even mindless. It is Samantha's sixteenth birthday, but unfortunately her birthday has fallen on the day before her sister's wedding. Eclipsed by the wedding, her birthday is forgotten. Eventually, though, she gets to be with the boy of her dreams. The situations she faces in the film revolve around the lack of recognition of her birthday, a school day, a school dance, and the wedding; the issues (and, therefore, the jokes) center around love, breast size, menstruation and "doing it." At the center of this film are the sexual values of which sexual repression is made: what is important, what is good, what is bad, what is ugly. Through examples, 16 Candles prescribes those values and behaviors which will make a teenage female successful in what is clearly her most important goal: catching a male.

The premise of the film itself is based on a competition between two events which are stereotypically significant to females, the wedding and the sixteenth birthday. No girl wants it said of her that she's "sweet sixteen and never been kissed." However, in an attempt to update adolescent sexual experience, Hughes suggests that mere kissing is no longer the goal of the sixteen-year-old female. In class, Samantha

responds to a series of questions written in a note from her girlfriend which identifies her sexual fantasies. She's never "done it," but wants to "do it" with Jake Ryan. From the outset of the film, then, we are aware of two important goals for females: 1) getting a boyfriend and 2) getting a husband.

That love and the private sphere are feminine and technology and the public sphere primarily masculine is clearly the case in the films examined thus far. While David Lightman and Ferris Bueller with full male sovereignty become heroes through their control of technology, the issues of breast size and menstruation, presumably "female" issues, brought up within the first ten minutes of 16 Candles indicate that these are central issues for teenage females. As we watch the family getting ready for school and work, we learn from her little brother that the bride is on her period. As the bride slips into the bathroom ahead of her father Little Brother says, "Dad, she got her period. Should make for an interesting honeymoon." The issue of breast size is mentioned by Samantha herself as we join her in her room. She looks at herself in the mirror on the morning of her birthday commenting, "Chronologically, you're 16 today, but physically you're still 15." In case we miss the specific reference, she later comments, "You need four inches of bod and a great birthday." Later, the grandparents refer to her

physical development. Says Grandma, "Fred, she's gotten her boobies."

Replies Grandpa Fred, "I'd better go get my magnifying glass."

Continues Grandma, "Oh...they are so perky." At this point she reaches out to touch Samantha's breasts. Samantha, mortified, later comments, "I can't believe my grandmother actually felt me up."

In case we might have forgotten about the issues during the course of the film, they are brought up again in the second half. Samantha comments on her bridesmaid's dress that "I don't even have one-tenth of the bod to fill the stupid bust up." Hauling the bride into the church, the mother comments about the bride to a female bystander that "her monthly bill came early" so she took a muscle relaxer. When the bride falls over from the overdose of muscle relaxers, the mother whispers to the father that she has "a cramp." And finally, when they are trying to get the bride out of the dressing room and down the aisle, the mother yells at the father, "For God's sake keep your voice down. Do you want the whole church to know she's on her period?"

Having established mammaries and menstruation and marriage as central concerns of the female, 16 Candles goes on to describe through example the mandates of proper behavior for the teenage female. It is in this instruction

that the film takes its strongest, most traditional, moral stance. The first part of the instruction suggests what is physically desirable in women. The two most attractive females in the film are Samantha's sister, Ginny, and Caroline, Samantha's classmate. As beautiful women, they are both involved with men, Ginny as a bride-to-be and Caroline as the current girlfriend of Jake, Samantha's heart's desire. Women who do not meet the beauty standard are not involved with men. At this point, Samantha appears to lack sufficient beauty to attract the kind of man she wants although a "nerd" pays attention to her. Throughout the film are hints, disguised as running jokes, about what happens to ugly girls. At the dance, we are shown two girls dancing together. They are both fat and plain-faced and one wears a neck brace. Later, we are shown the girl with the brace trying to drink from the water fountain, squirting herself with water. Finally, at the party, the girl with the brace tries to tip back a beer can to drink from it and falls backward to the floor. As the subject of ridicule, the unattractive girl is undesirable to males.

Perhaps in deference to cultural criticism which suggests that we put too much emphasis on superficial beauty, the film attempts to illustrate that although physical beauty in women is desirable, such beauty alone will not bring true love. Through the examples of Ginny and Caroline, we learn

that superficial beauty has superficial concerns which will bring, at best, only superficial love. Ginny is portrayed essentially as a "bimbo." Raving about her husband to be Ginny exclaims, "He's the first one who's loved me six months in a row!" Her response to Samantha's moodiness is equally shallow and vulgar, besides: "I can't believe this! You make someone a bridesmaid and they shit all over you." Samantha's father further supports that shallow beauty is undesirable. He tells Samantha that he worries about her sister because she may not appreciate what she's gotten so easily, but, he declares, validating Samantha, "when it [love] happens to you, it'll be forever." That Samantha's big-breasted, beautiful nemesis, Caroline, is as shallow as sister Ginny is demonstrated several times in the film. In one scene, Caroline and Jake are dancing romantically when she says harshly, "I think it's time to blow this thing off and go to your house. God, I love when your parents are out of town. I fantasize that I'm your wife and we're the richest, most popular adults in town." When Jake doesn't respond appropriately, she becomes more forceful: "Just remember one thing. I can name twenty guys who'd kill to love me." When Jake asks her if that's to be understood as a threat, she replies, "It's a fact." Caroline apparently shares the female teenage goal of marriage with her peers. However, what distinguishes Caroline is her recognition of

her beauty as a powerful commodity. Caroline is full aware of the negotiable currency she owns and is willing to use it to get what she wants. Yet it is Caroline's awareness of her own beauty and power that counts against her as a desirable candidate for a man's genuine affection. What the woman-who-would-find-true-love must be is beautiful, but ignorant of her beauty.

Yet beauty alone is insufficient, the desirable woman must be sensitive. Insensitivity is undesirable in a female. Caroline invites people to Jake's house for a party. She gets drunk and property is damaged and even destroyed. Speaking to the nerd Ted about her, Jake says, "She's beautiful and she's built and all that, but I'm just not interested anymore."

"Does that matter?" Ted asks.

"Yeah. It matters. She's insensitive. Look what she did to my house. She doesn't know shit about love. The only thing she cares about is partying. I want a serious girlfriend. Somebody I can love that's gonna love me back."⁶⁰

⁶⁰It is interesting to note that Jake did nothing to stop the party. In fact, throughout the party his resistance consisted of talking on the phone behind a closed door and walking through the chaos looking disgusted--but never did he act to stop it.

That the beautiful Caroline can be rejected for insensitivity tells us that insensitivity in females is bad.

Although the standards for females are clearly delineated in the film, males apparently face no such restrictions either in their goals or their qualifications. For the majority of teenage males in the film, sexual conquest is the goal. Not sharing this goal are two freshmen boys whose love of science and technology coupled with their immaturity leaves them blissfully ignorant of sexual matters. Their lack of desire makes them undesirable. Otherwise, the range of males who are successful in their sexual conquests is far wider than the range of females who are successful. The handsome but unhappy Jake Ryan has a girlfriend. Even as an object of ridicule, the Chinese exchange student Long Duc Dong (referred to as Long Dong) fares better than the disabled female. He is treated as a slave by his surrogate family. He describes in pidgin English how he loves "visiting gran'ma and gran'pa and writing letters to parents and pushing lawn mowing machine so gran'pa's hyena don't get disturbed." Gran'ma adds that he also "does dishes and helps with the laundry." In spite of his being abused racially by the film itself, Long Duc Dong nevertheless succeeds sexually, acquiring a big-breasted Amazon of a girlfriend. The undesirable "bohunk," who is betrothed to Samantha's sister, although he is crude and lower-class, ends up

marrying her. Even the freshman nerd, Ted, gets to have sex with the beautiful, but shallow, Caroline.

In the beginning of the film, two goals of teenage females are established, the boyfriend and the wedding. One option for female behavior to achieve these goals is represented by Caroline. Caroline fails because she is "immoral." A second option is represented by the sister, Ginny. Ginny succeeds in achieving the wedding, but, because she achieves it through immoral behavior, she still fails because the male she is marrying is not worthy. Having seen how the goals may be thwarted or inadequately fulfilled, we can turn to an example of how to properly meet the goals. By examining the heroine, Samantha, we may derive the qualities necessary for a female teenager to find true love. What is most desirable in females is innocence manifest as virginity and an integral part of innocence is a lack of power. Samantha's powerlessness is shown in several instances. First she is powerless to fulfill her expectations. In a self-disclosure to a "nerd" who later becomes her ally, Samantha explains, "It's really been a shitty birthday....I didn't get shit--not even happy birthday. My whole family just sort of blew it off. It's a brand new year. I'm 16. I should be happy." Even her grandparents, in town for the wedding, forget her birthday. Referring to grandparents and birthdays, she comments, "They live for that shit." In this

regard, they too fail to meet her expectations. When asked by her friend why she doesn't remind her family, Samantha justifies her unwillingness to exert power: "I wouldn't stoop" to reminding them, she claims.

Besides being forgotten on her birthday, Samantha has no sovereignty within the family. She is displaced from her room by her grandparents and tries her brother's room. The Chinese exchange student is sharing that room so she is left to sleep on the couch. Her sister incorrectly assesses Samantha's moodiness: "You're jealous I'm getting married," she says, "You're being selfish." In the coup de grace, her grandmother forces Samantha to take Long Duc Dong to the dance with her.

Socially, Samantha is powerless, becoming a victim of a nerd's attention. As a second-class person, she has to ride the bus to and from school. What we are shown is other non-persons, nerds with funny hats, playing kazoo music, sharing the bus ride. When Ted, the nerd, approaches her, she rejects him, telling him to "Go to hell" and that he's "a total fag." Ultimately, though, powerless to control any of the circumstances of her life, Samantha is forced to associate with another non-person. As in another Hughes' film, The Breakfast Club, the coming together of misfits invariably results in therapeutic self-disclosure and a

subsequent coalition.⁶¹ What may be significant in this film is that the coalition is between a sixteen-year-old virgin girl and a fourteen-year-old virgin boy. Disclosing one of his secrets, Ted tells her that , "I've never bagged a babe."⁶² Having revealed this information, he twice attempts to have sex with Samantha, asking, "Can I have sex with you?" She refuses him, however, allowing that she's "saving" herself for Jake Ryan. That Samantha and Ted are equals is emphasized by the alliance they form based on their common sexual status and their powerlessness.

Having established Ted and Samantha as equals, the contrast between the male and female solution to the problem presented in this film is consistent with their goals. For the male teenager in this film, sexual initiation and conquest are the goals. Thus, Ted will assert his power through sex to change his status. The female teenager in this film, acting traditionally as the keeper of the morality, has the nobler goal of love and marriage. Thus,

⁶¹The actors and roles in 16 Candles are startlingly similar to those in The Breakfast Club with Anthony Michael Hall as a "nerd" and Molly Ringwald as the "rich bitch." Clearly, Hughes was following a winning formula.

⁶²The use of the term "bagged" is an important indicator of attitude. In hunting the term "bag" means to kill or catch. This use of language foreshadows Ted's behavior when he finally is with a woman.

rather than asserting her power as a sexual being, Samantha must withhold it to achieve her goal. And so we come to it: 16 Candles is a simple cultural cliché decorated with youthful performers and bad language: Men lay whores, but love virgins; to find true love, stay a virgin. The final scenes of the film emphasize this message.

With the disregard for property and rules so typical in current teenpics, Jake has let the 14-year-old nerd Ted drive Caroline home in Jake's parents' Rolls-Royce convertible. As Ted drives Caroline, she waves her arms, sings, plays music loudly, in general acting like the drunken fool she is. Even the virgin nerd is forced to comment on the unattractiveness of such behavior: "I can't believe you're so popular, acting like this." Ignoring him, Caroline comments on her sexual liberation, a comment we may understand to be representative of the "modern" woman. She's on the pill, she says, because, "it makes it O.K. to be really super careless." In what may be supposed to be traditional male fashion, Ted relaxes his critical moral stance. "This is getting good," he decides, as the theme from Peter Gunn plays in the background. The male goal of conquest is emphasized when Ted drives by his friend's house to show off Caroline. Like a hunter who has bagged an animal, Ted insists on having his picture taken with his trophy, the blonde girl in the drunken stupor. The bad girl recovers as the cold light of day breaks. "Did you

enjoy it?" he asks. "I have this weird feeling I did," she replies, bringing a look of pride to his young face. He has achieved his goal, the sexual conquest that launches him into manhood. Interestingly, perhaps even ironically, Caroline is changed by her encounter with the innocent. With a statement that makes it sound like she prefers the small pleasures a virgin might, she tells Ted, "You know what I liked best? Waking up in your arms." With new maturity, she faces Jake and tells him she's sorry [about the party and the house] and that "neither one of us is gonna die if it doesn't happen for us." As Caroline and Jake hug, we realize that she is a different girl from the one we originally met. Through the contact with innocence, Caroline has been brought back into line with the patriarchal code. Ted has achieved full male sovereignty through his sexual success with Caroline; Caroline, on the other hand, gives up her sovereignty realizing that her failure to be submissive and compliant caused her to lose Jake.

Throughout the film, Samantha does not change. She starts as a virgin and ends as one with this difference: by staying a virgin, she gets her man. The male code for women of love and romance was set clearly by her father. Ted gave her the chance to break free, but he was not a worthy partner. Finally, we see Samantha at the church. Her sister's wedding is complete and the couple and the guests

have left for the reception. Samantha, holding her sister's mislaid bridal veil, is, symbolically, the only true female candidate for marriage. As she emerges alone from the holy sanctuary, she sees the love of her life leaning casually on his hot, red sports car, waiting for her. To this point, they have never spoken a word to each other, but romantic love apparently replaces the need for actual conversation. Together they drive off and later we see them celebrating her birthday with a cake. He wants her to make a wish, but she replies, "My wish already came true." Jake's avowed goal is not sexual conquest because he's had his fill of it. He wants true love. Samantha's goal is to get a boyfriend. The worthy lover, saving herself, loving from afar, is eventually noticed and rewarded. What works for her is not really magic, although the story encourages magical thinking, but rather plain old-fashioned morality. Ultimately, Samantha has no more sovereignty than she ever did, but then again, she never really wanted it. Her role as woman is affirmed, not through the "natural" symbols of mammaries and menstruation, but rather through her traditional social function of upholding morality in accordance with the patriarchal code.

CHAPTER VI

DAYS OF FUTURE PAST: THE VALIDATION OF TEEN CULTURE

In Steven Spielberg's and Robert Zemeckis' special effects classic, Back to the Future (1985) the audience is presented with an exploration of American teen culture. In 1985, Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) is a good friend to classic mad scientist Dr. Emmet Brown (Christopher Lloyd). Brown's experimental time machine sends Marty into the past where he accidentally interferes with his own personal history. Once Marty intervenes in his personal history, the present, as he knows it, begins to disappear. Having met all of his family, we may not perceive this as a particularly bad thing; however, Marty must restore the past or he'll never get to experience his own present. In a journey into the past that bears remarkable similarities to Oedipus' story, Marty eventually stumbles into his father as a young man. Although his father is just as disappointing then as he is to Marty in current time, Marty, in the interest of self-preservation, must help him get involved with Lorraine, the girl who is to be Marty's mother. Unfortunately, Marty himself becomes the object of Lorraine's desire. Thus, in this upbeat Spielberg-informed Oedipal tale, Marty temporarily replaces his father in his mother's affections

and eventually kills him, but only metaphorically. Through this accidental assumption of his father's role, a situation created by the juxtaposition of time periods, Marty gains the power to alter both past and future.

Within the context of this plot, both current and historical aspects of teen culture are revealed. While this film apotheosizes the teenager, giving him/her the power to control not only his/her future, but to reconstruct his/her past as well, it also illustrates what appears at first to be an essentially postmodern context. At the outset of the film, we are in real time, 1985, but as the story progresses we are taken back to the 1950s where the story of teenagers begins. This temporal intersection of past and present in teen culture allows the main character, Marty McFly, to construct a new identity for himself while simultaneously allowing the spectators to examine their own history in terms of family, technology and culture.

Through the convention of alien-meets-earthlings, Marty's trip into the past allows us a glimpse at the dominant cultural references of past and present. Entering the past, Marty, like all teenagers, is alien. As much cultural reality as cinematic gimmick, Marty often makes errors in words and behavior, yet the errors would produce no humor at all unless the audience itself were steeped in the same brand names. At a soda fountain, Marty orders a "Tab,"

the sugar-free cola beverage which has yet to be invented. Told he'll get a "Tab" after he orders something, Marty requests a "Pepsi Free." The predictable misunderstanding occurs wherein Marty is informed that he can have a Pepsi, but he'll have to pay for it. Finally Marty gives up the hunt for brand-names and requests something that has no sugar in it. The man behind the counter pours him a cup of coffee. Marty's clothes are another item which sets him apart from the society of the fifties. The puffy down vest, a trendy item among teenagers of the eighties, is merely an object of ridicule in the fifties. In no fewer than four instances, various characters comment that Marty must have just gotten off a ship, that he must be afraid of drowning or otherwise refer to the resemblance between his vest and a life jacket.

What is shown in these humorous examples of misunderstanding are the dominant meanings of each of the time periods relative to various consumer items. For Marty, the sugar-free sodas have highly recognizable (to the 80s audience) names and ordering them is a common practice. His culture, as well as the audience's, is dominated by certain brandnames and an anti-sugar preoccupation. In fact, Marty himself, as the ultimate 80s consumer speaks in brand names. Fifty's culture, on the other hand, is dominated by economic concerns. The "Tab" comes at the end of the meal when the customer pays and no one gets anything for (Pepsi) free. The

conflict of meanings in this scene reveals much about the cultures of both time periods.

Having guided the audience with obvious humor to notice this simple contrast between past and present, the film then takes the audience sight-seeing, allowing their informed notion of the present to contrast with what is shown on the screen. What we visit with Marty is a "Happy Days" world. When a car pulls into a gas station, four white men run out in spiffy uniforms to check, clean, and fill. Against the backdrop of current teenage experience, this scene with a bevy of white gas station attendants servicing a car may be humorous in its unexpectedness or meaningless as new information. For the mature audience, however, the scene serves as nostalgia. Likewise, the audiences may respond differently to the fact that when the bell rings at school, all the students run to class, or that Marty's meeting with the significant people in his life takes place in an old-fashioned soda fountain. Rather than the overt sexuality of today's youth, we are shown the shy George asking Marty how to get a girl. Adolescent males and females are portrayed as innocent with hints of what they will become in the future. Thus Marty's encounter with the teenage culture's past emphasizes not only those traditions which were common to the 1950s teenager but also those which lead into the 80s.

In the context of this film, however, the view of the past is romanticized so the representations of traditions must be suspect in their authenticity. Take, for example, Marty's mother's view of herself in the past. At the opening of the film, Lorraine McFly could easily be a Tennessee Williams' creation, like Blanche DuBois, an alcoholic frump lost in nostalgia. Commenting to her family about Marty's girlfriend, Jennifer, Lorraine says she does not like Jennifer. "Any girl who calls a boy is just asking for trouble. [It's] terrible, girls chasing boys. When I was your age I never chased a boy, called a boy, sat in a parked car with a boy." She goes on to explain that her meeting with her husband was "meant to be." Lorraine met Marty's father, George, when her father accidentally hit him with a car. Seeing George as "helpless as a puppy," she felt sorry for him, accompanied him to the Enchantment Under The Sea Dance where they shared their first kiss, and the rest was history.

Once Marty replaces his father, the same events occur, only with Marty as the participant-victim. Marty is carried into Lorraine's house and when he awakes we begin to learn about Lorraine's actual behavior toward the object of her affection. Lorraine is in the bedroom watching Marty when he regains consciousness. She keeps calling him Calvin which we learn she has assumed is his name from seeing the Calvin Klein logo on Marty's underwear. Realizing she has seen his

underwear, Marty pulls the bedclothes closer asking where his pants are. She replies, "Over there. Across my hope chest." She then sits next to him on the bed, reaching to touch his injured head. Later at dinner it is she who suggests that he should stay the night with her family since, having caused his accident, they have an obligation to his well-being. Grabbing his knee under the dinner table, she goes on to suggest that he could sleep in her room. Such examples of her aggressive behavior are only the beginning, however. Later she consents to park with Marty, not realizing he is merely executing a plan to help George win her, she pulls out a bottle of booze and brazenly lights a cigarette. This wanton behavior clashes directly with the romantic view the adult Lorraine has of her teenage past, yet points directly to the adult behaviors that Lorraine exhibits. Here again the past traditions lead in a straight line to present circumstances.

Marty's father, on the other hand, seems not to possess a vision of his past. He seems fixed in time. In the 1985 opening of the film, the adult George, a stereotypic nerd, is denounced by the adult Biff, a stereotypic bully. Biff wants George to complete some reports so that he can have them retyped to look like his own work; yet, it is Biff who is the supervisor and George who is the lackey. Demeaning George further, Biff pulls him by the necktie and knocks on his

head. Humiliated in front of his son Marty, George merely apologizes.

In 1956, the adolescent George is a gentle dreamer who gets good grades, enjoys writing and reading science-fiction and believes in "true love." He is a shy fellow, representative of the uncertainty of teenagers, but he is a good man and true. He takes notes from Marty on the best way to woo Lorraine. Approaching her, he attempts to make a romantic statement but is overwhelmed by nervousness. "You are my density," he announces. After another attempt, he finally gets it right: "You are my destiny." His self-conscious sensitivity, however, is not a trait to be admired.

In 1956, the relationship between George and Biff is the same. Biff is a loud-mouthed bully who wants Lorraine, Marty's mother-to-be, as his own. He harasses her continually. He is merciless with George as well. Having identified George as a weaker being, Biff abuses him. He forces George to perform various menial tasks for him, including his homework. Biff wants George to complete his homework so that he can rewrite it to look like his own work. Demeaning George further, Biff pulls him by the neck and knocks on his head. George maintains no personal dignity, allowing the bully Biff to humiliate him frequently and publicly. It is this lack of personal dignity that the elder McFly carries into the future. Clearly, the dynamic between

George and Biff is destined to stay the same unless some powerful outside force changes it.

It is with this same sense of inevitability that we must look at the parallels between Marty and his father. When Marty is late to school, the disciplinarian, Mr.Strickland, catches him in the hall and says, "You're a slacker, McFly. You remind me of your father when he went here. He was a slacker too." Commenting on Marty's later audition for his band to play at a forthcoming dance, Strickland tells Marty not to bother because, "No McFly ever amounted to anything in the history of Hill Valley." Although Marty foreshadows events by replying, "History is gonna change," there is little reason to believe so when we see the 1956 George being reprimanded by the same-but-younger Mr.Strickland. George, too, is called a "slacker."

Not only are outside opinions of Marty and his father the same, their opinions of themselves seem identical as well. In 1986, Marty is afraid to try to promote his band and his music to companies because they might say he's no good and he simply "can't take that kind of rejection." In 1956, George will not let anyone read his science-fiction writings because they might says he's no good and he simply "can't take that kind of rejection." Clearly the normal progression is in the direction of the adage "like father, like son."

In this film, though, the element which acts to alter this inevitable progression is technology. The opening of the film reveals one major aspect of 1980s teen culture, its problematic relationship to technology. Doc, a modern sorcerer, controls science and technology, and Marty becomes the sorcerer's apprentice. We are given some hints that technology, like some ancient magic, is not completely under Marty's control. In the opening of the film, he goes into Doc's living quarters-cum-laboratory and, not finding Doc around, hooks an electric guitar into the amplifiers. In an act which is completely abusive of technology, Marty turns the volume to its maximum levels. In a burst of sparks and smoke, Marty destroys the speakers and nearly himself. He could have been killed by his abuse of technology, but all he gets here is a "rush," not a warning. Marty's use of technology for his own pleasure represents one potential relationship to science that the audience, too, might have.

As an apprentice, Marty is privy to the sorcerer's secrets. Brown tells Marty to meet him in a particular parking lot after midnight to show him a "major breakthrough." The breakthrough turns out to be one of the short-lived DeLorean racing cars converted to a working time machine. The plutonium to power the machine has been stolen from a Libyan terrorist organization. To demonstrate the time machine, Doc sends his dog Einstein into the future and

recovers him. At this point, the terrorists, come to retrieve their plutonium, race into the parking lot, guns ablaze. In the ensuing melee, Doc is killed, but Marty escapes death when technology fails and not only does the gunman's weapon misfire, the pursuit van will not start. Barely escaping in the DeLorean time machine, a terrified Marty is catapulted into the past.

In this brief, eclectic transaction are some important elements which add to the representations of the potential relationships which exist between people and technology. The dog's name, Einstein, suggests classical science, established and credible. It points to the long-standing tradition of genius. Competing with the image of traditional science is the use of the DeLorean as a time-machine. The DeLorean gained its cult status as a masterpiece of automotive engineering and a toy of the depraved rich whose wealth was linked tightly to cocaine sales and use. The addition of the terrorists to this uncomfortable mélange represents another element, the primitive, political application of science to create weapons which destabilize cultures and threaten humanity. Thus, in this brief scene, several "meanings" for science are offered.

Regardless of what one accepts as the proper meaning for science, there can be little doubt that science is power. Empowered by science, the teenage Marty becomes the outside

force, motivated by the romantic coda, "Anyplace but here, anytime but now." By interpolating past events with present information, Marty becomes a messenger who does not merely reconstruct the past, but rather, "disappears" it, replacing it with an alternate reality far more to his liking.

Marty's intervention in his past, however, demonstrates the fragility of the chain of events that we call Destiny. Marty, in his quest to correct his nearly fatal error of becoming the replacement for his own father, tries to arrange circumstances at the Enchantment Under the Sea dance so that George can rescue Lorraine from Marty's own simulated attempts to be "fresh" with her. The plan goes awry, of course, and it is Biff whose real attack replaces Marty's simulated one. The shy George, unaware of the change in the plan, acts out his chivalry, slaying the real dragon anyway. As a result of George rescuing her, Lorraine becomes attracted to him as her hero and he becomes admired by his peers. As much by accident as by design, Marty becomes "the father to the man," imparting power to his father not only to solve his problem with Biff but to gain Lorraine's love as well.

In spite of the complexity of a plot which pits present against past and past against future in a variation of the Oedipus myth, certain representations are clear. In 1985, Marty acts as the adult because his parents are weak; in

1956, his role is the same. He comes from the future in both instances and, as a result, has more power than anyone else.

In 1986, Littwin concluded that "...in recent years, there has been a blurring of the lines between adulthood and adolescence."⁶³ Certainly, this role confusion is amply demonstrated in the behaviors of Back to the Future's characters. When we meet these characters in 1985, prior to Marty's intervention in his personal history, it would appear that all have been arrested in their development at the teen age. The behavior of George and Biff is adolescent. Lorraine romanticizes the past, reminiscing about their fated meeting while George merely retreats from reality into television, a permanently passive couch-potato. In Marty's immediate family there is no adult with sense or strength. The lack of successful adult role models forces Marty to take the role of the adult, specifically that of the patriarch.

Doc is the one adult who appears to remain outside the scope of Marty's power. Doc is the stereotypical mad scientist, operating in both the past and the present on the fringe of stable, upper-middle class society. Doc may very well represent science through the ages, heuristic and reflexive, learning from itself. Science is the focus of his life, and, though he remains optimistic, in 1956 none of his

⁶³Littwin, 132.

inventions work. When he is first approached by Marty, he wears a device on his head that is supposed to enable him to read minds. Unfortunately, it doesn't work. In 1985, though, Doc's machines do work. When the film opens, we witness the successful operation of a Rube Goldberg alarm clock/dog-feeder/coffee-maker. In addition, even the grander experiment of the DeLorean time machine works. It is Marty though, who travels into the past showing Doc the future success which may in fact spur him toward that success. Yet here, Marty is as much a tool of science as it is his tool. For the viewers whose education is now grounded in, even dependent upon technology, this paradox may be painfully obvious.

If subsequent events hinged solely on George and Lorraine getting together, the future for Marty would have simply been duplicated. He would have returned to the same status-poor 1985 family, not a decent middle-class family, but rather a crude, working class family. A single act of aggression resulting in Biff's defeat produces the critical change in McFly history: George gains power and Biff loses it. Through Marty's intervention, George's behaviors change. The intervention by concepts that are "OUTATIME," as the DeLorean license plate emphasizes, appears to shift the potential outcomes. Thus, when Marty at last returns to his own time, he becomes a hero, at least to the viewing

audience. Doc is resurrected through Marty's use of the time machine, but better than that, Marty's family is recreated. However, Marty's intervention does not create a new outcome in that universe. Rather, the addition of a single event creates a whole new universe, better, perhaps, but still predestined.

With the alteration of a single event, one universe vanishes, another appears. In such reasoning, the potential for different outcomes is completely ignored. Marty does not return to a changed father and mother, but rather to a newly created father and mother. The dysfunctional, lower-class family that was his, complete with ne'er-do-well older brother, alcoholic mother, spineless father and criminal uncle have simply disappeared, in a manner which would greatly please the government of the 1980s. The continually repeated message, "You can do anything you want if you put your mind to it," might well be the watchword of the Reagan era for those who would choose poverty.

Unfortunately, the Horatio Alger sentiment is hypocritical in this film. The failure to take personal responsibility that informs much of the 12-step lifestyle prevalent in American culture, affects this movie as well. What will be is too tightly tied to what was. We are the way we are, apparently, because of our personal history. Unless and until that history is changed, we have no other choice.

The teenage and adult audiences both may praise or blame their history for their present. Likewise, Marty McFly's new life is predicated on and limited to options grounded in romanticized stereotypes: the "good-guy" father, the marginal mother, the "bad-guy" peer and a closed, highly differentiated social order. The journey into the past that we take reveals not an active society, but rather one fixed in our romantic legends like an impaled, preserved butterfly. Not only are the representations of the 1950s fixed, but likewise the representations of what is desirable in the 1980s. Having been empowered through Marty's intervention, the McFly family becomes an idealized stereotype of the 1980s successful family. The addition of a single event to their history, leads inexorably to the replacement of the nebbish father and frumpy mother by two upper-class people, the father a successful writer, the mother a proud, active supermom of the eighties. Their house is superbly furnished, their children attractive and successful. They have the leisure to play tennis and the money to pay someone to detail their cars while they are playing. What Michael J. Fox gets as Marty McFly in Back to the Future is the good Republican family he never achieved as Alex Keaton in T.V.'s "Family Ties." Ultimately, Back To The Future uses a postmodern disguise to offer an elitist, modernist view of not only the teenage past, but its 1980s present as well.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this thesis was to examine how ideology circulated through some of the teenage films of the eighties. By summarizing what these products have to say in context, we may better see the representations of teenagers relative to American culture.

In the 1980s America herself could have been described as adolescent. She was self-centered, consuming two-thirds of the world's natural resources to sustain one-fifth of the world's population. She liked big, expensive toys and she liked having lots of money to spend. She often won her friends by fighting their enemies or buying their affection. She was brash and brazen and, like all adolescents, believed in her immortality. At the same time, she lacked self-assurance, her postures varying from warrior to diplomat, from protector to prostitute. Government, in its parental role, encouraged social and economic Darwinism rather than providing a nurturing environment for a population in need of leadership. Generally, the four films about teenagers examined for this thesis merely exploit and enlarge 1980s America's adolescent tendencies.

One of the social characteristics of the 1980s that was alluded to in Chapter II of this thesis was that the new hero was "self-propelled and blatantly self-interested...."⁶⁴ Unquestionably, a quality that all four teenage protagonists in these sample films share is self-centeredness. David Lightman is concerned only with playing computer games and then saving his own neck when he starts WWIII. Ferris is disconnected from everyone, manipulating friends and family alike so that he can have a good time. Samantha is completely preoccupied with herself, wanting only to get a boyfriend. Finally, Marty McFly needs to get himself back to the present. What is blatantly absent from these films is any political concern. While this lack of concern may represent the actuality (less than half of all registered voters voted in 80's elections), it additionally commends it. The concern about WWIII in Wargames is not that innocent lives will be lost across the globe, including those in third world countries who not only do not know about computers but cannot get any food that day, but rather that David Lightman will not learn to swim and that Jennifer will not be on television. Likewise, accessibility to the public education system is assumed in Ferris Bueller's Day Off. What might Ferris' response be if he could not go to school, did not

⁶⁴Ibid., 191.

have the means, the language, the leisure? How then could he reject the current education system as meaningless? The feminist movement was still alive in the 80s, but Samantha in Sixteen Candles was apparently untouched by it. Had she never heard of it? Or is the audience to believe that for worthy girls to pursue a course of such extreme independence would be not only unusual but wrong? Finally, we must look at Marty McFly's trip Back To The Future. In a kind of cosmic Horatio Alger story, Marty abandons the lower-middle class existence and, aided only by luck and magic, takes himself into the upper-middle class. His transformation is immediate, not dependent on hard-work or diligence. Clearly, any similarity between these films and reality is strictly coincidental.

Economically, the Reagan years were a time of immense social stratification. The status of the teenagers in these films clearly reflects the importance of wealth in the 1980s. All of the teenagers live in upper middle-class neighborhoods and possess all the trappings of privileged youth. Like Ferris Bueller and his friend Cameron, David Lightman's room is filled with expensive, high-tech equipment. Marty McFly is unique in that he moves from the lower-class, represented by a sloppy house, overweight and poorly dressed family members to the upper-class, a prestigious house, well-groomed, trim family members, and, best of all, his very own

four-by-four truck in the driveway. Yet, not one of the teenagers in any of these films is employed. It would seem that, in spite of the crushing economic demands of the time, these teenagers are able to live idly as did their counterparts in the 1950s. While misbehaving sufficiently to appear to rebel against adult values, the main characters in these films maintains their traditional economic dependency not only on their parents but on the dominant modes which support the white hegemony.

In fact, the lack of genuine rebellion in these films may be most disturbing to those who believe that loyal opposition from the young is necessary to the growth of a culture. The conflict represented between the generations in these films is meaningless. More often than not, the teenagers in these films validate those values which governmental and social policy in the 1980s would indicate are sanctioned by adults. David Lightman is a technocrat who demonstrates not wisdom, but rather, the power of technology to stop war. He does not offer a long-term solution, but merely solves the problem he has created in the present. We might take both David Lightman's and Ferris Bueller's rejection of traditional education as an act of rebellion, but for the fact that both stay in the system. To be sure, they are difficult and ill-mannered, questionable candidates for the high school diploma that society, even the society in

the films, requires, but nevertheless, they will stay in the system. Samantha, of course, offers no rebellion at all, but rather whines about her situation, using bad language whenever possible, until she gets a boyfriend. At this point, she, too, is absorbed into fundamentalist, conservative, mainstream culture. Fanciful as it is, Marty's McFly's adventure only creates a more stable adult world, a world endorsed by Reagan proponents. His original family, misfits in 1985 American culture, are, through his efforts, transformed into an exemplary American family of the eighties, monied, educated, and, above all, well-groomed.

The social order shown in these films maintains not only class, but racist and sexist traditions as well. Most frequently, we are shown many examples of people from the upper-class, adult and teenager alike. With no close scrutiny, we notice that all of the examples are white people. We may also note the glaring absence of any other race in these high-class environs. For the most part, ethnic people are relegated to humane, but menial positions. In Wargames, some of the military personnel in the background are black. In Ferris Bueller, the only minority members shown are the Hispanics who park cars after driving them recklessly and illegally. Back To The Future gives us two examples of black minorities, both stereotypical. Marty McFly meets a black man who works as a janitor in the soda

shop. (That he will later be mayor functions only as slight nod of recognition to political liberals.) Later, he encounters a group of black musicians whom he joins temporarily in a rock n' roll display which the conservative teenage audience is not yet ready to welcome. The only minority present in any of the films as a major character is the Chinese boy, Long Duc Dong, in Sixteen Candles. His larger presence in the film is justified by his role as an exchange student. While we might applaud the inclusion of an Asian in a major film at a time when Asians were the fastest-growing group of immigrants, we need to look carefully at the representation that is offered. Long Duc Dong is viciously stereotyped as woefully inept in language and social behavior. Within the neighborhood and school populations and even in the service occupations, no other minorities are present.

Gender roles, too, are represented traditionally in these films. In actuality in the 1980s, more women were becoming heads-of-households, but that particular value was not endorsed in these films. Rather what these films show is that boys take action, experiencing adventure and narrow-misses, while girls remain passive until a leader appears. In three of the four films, Wargames, Ferris Bueller, and Back To The Future, the female characters, adult or teen, have no knowledge of technology and merely follow the lead of the

males. Possessing neither autonomy nor assertiveness, the female, Samantha, too, merely retains her world through passivity.

While the high school dropout rates continued to increase in the 1980s, the demand for specific education rose dramatically. In actual 1980s culture, then, as in these films, control of technology is empowering. Interestingly, as represented in these films, technology is also a masculine domain. While David Lightman's "childish" raids into computers leads to a serious problem, nevertheless, he is the one who possesses the proper combination of skills and vision to solve the problem that the adults cannot solve. When Ferris Bueller goes head-to-head with authority in school and out, he dominates, successfully subverting all of his elders and their institutions and traditions. Marty McFly possesses the ultimate power, the ability to recreate his parents into beings who more closely resemble the Bill Gates prototype. In every case these males have access to state-of-the-art technology, provided for them by adults. Only one protagonist, the female Samantha, does not hold the keys to the technological kingdom and, subsequently, does not conquer the world.

From the 1950s to the present, the teenager has dominated as a unique consumer-group. Yet, it is not only unrealistic, but inaccurate as well to suggest that

teenagers' buying power grants them power over all aspects of their lives. While the teenagers in these sample films, male teenagers in particular, take on some of the characteristics and powers of adults, adults do not, conversely, take on the qualities of juveniles. Rather, they become not just immature, but downright foolish, possessing no admirable traits. In every film examined, adults are pitiful creatures, driven by dogma and ignorance. In Wargames, for instance, the General and the Expert are unable to abandon their hardline views to reach a solution; In Ferris Bueller, the dean and the parents are fixed in their views; likewise the adults in 16 Candles. In Back To The Future, the adults are so weak and pitiful that it is necessary to recreate them in the teenager's image. Not only are all these adults inept, incompetent and insensitive, their inflexibility prevents them from solving critical problems. Their inability to adapt puts the world at risk. Thus it is that the ever flexible, adaptable, knowledgeable teenager moves into power.

Ideologically, the films examined here commend certain behaviors to adolescents. While teenage activities and language are validated, they are validated within the context of American society. Teenagers may control the world in these teenpics, but they do so to reestablish adult values in the eighties. While the lack of adequate adult role models in these films may have a damaging effect, a greater concern

is the image of teenagers that is presented. Recently some authors have expressed concern over the loss of innocence of today's youth. When social conditions favored intact families and economic conditions required only one wage-earner per family, children were more likely to experience the kind of sheltering that has been idealized as being characteristic of the 1950s teenager. While many critics bemoan the conditions which have led to the emergence of the "adultified" child, other evidence suggests that while the boundary between adult and childhood is certainly being blurred, the blurring is occurring in both directions. Adults are becoming juvenilized, while indiscriminate access to information is causing youth to become adultified. The "adultified" teen in the eighties teenpic, then, is simply a teenager endowed with the traits adults in the eighties should have. When teenagers are shown always in control, always able to solve problems from sexual encounters with the opposite sex to close encounters with world war, what are they being told? The implication is that young people can assume adulthood because they can do certain adultlike things. This message, suggesting that shortcuts to adulthood are possible, may be dangerous to youth. In short, such portrayals encourage "growth by substitution, by copying a form of behavior rather

than by exploring and developing one's own feelings, values, and attitudes."⁶⁵ Further, the portrayal of adults as rather silly beings who are easily manipulated and influenced and who, more than teenagers, need wise counsel and guidance reverses the perception of life stages. To this cinematic reversal add the societal mandate for eternal youth, as evidenced by the rise in cosmetic surgery, celebrity worship and membership in athletic clubs, and adolescence becomes more than just another stage of life; it becomes the only stage of life.

Against the background of reality in the eighties, the reality of teen drug abuse, and high unemployment, dropout and pregnancy rates, the world in these films looks utopian. In general, the utopia presented in these films is a white, upper-middle class domain, where money is plentiful, the present system is good, teenage employment is unnecessary, parents are benign presences, if they are present at all, and, most importantly, the teenager controls his world.

Having been presented with these conclusions, based on the examination of only four teenpics from the 1980s, the alert reader may appropriately ask, "So what?" Indeed, this lack of specific applicability may be inherent in a descriptive thesis. Certainly, the limitations of this

⁶⁵Elkind, 108,109.

thesis must be addressed, but it is important to realize that the limitations provide a basis for discussion of the application of the findings and point the way to future investigation.

The first limitation of this thesis is the choice of films. While the criteria for choosing the films suggest an historical scope and popularity that makes the findings generalizable, it must be noted that there is no definitive evidence regarding the actual composition of the attending audience. The financial statistics on the films indicate top-ten status at the box office, but which box offices? Were these films equally accessible and equally attended by rural, urban and suburban teenagers? Given the predilection of teenagers to see a movie they like more than once, were box-office earnings from first time or attenders with sufficient money to see the film more than once? Would these films be equally attended by all ethnic groups? Might particular ethnic groups see more specifically ethnic films as the recent upswing in films such as House Party, LaBamba and Stand and Deliver suggests? Perhaps it is the relentless bombardment of ads that compels teens to attend certain movies, regardless of ethnic association. Or perhaps the issue is even simpler: teenagers need a place to go and the movie theater is a place. To paraphrase the 1960s peacenik slogan, "Have they ever given a teenage movie where nobody

came?" Culturally, though, the "teenager" is an American creation. What would a film about American teenagers say to a foreign audience of teenagers? Would some representations be universal? With more complete knowledge of the audience participating in particular cinematic experiences, we may better understand the potential effects of that experience in ideological, rhetorical, psychological and/or sociological terms.

A second limitation of this thesis is the necessity for confining the historical investigation to only one decade. Over time, we might ask, have the representations in teenpics changed? What changes have taken place relative to the changes that the teenage culture itself has experienced? Given the representations in teenpics in the 1980s, we might examine the teenpics of the 1990s to see what has changed. Additionally, we might examine films from earlier times, tracing the similarities and differences in the way ideology circulates in the teen films from each decade.

The impact of the consistent repetition of particular representations in teen films, however, is problematic. Of foremost importance is to recognize that media effects are variable. While products may be sold to teenagers as a consumer-audience with clearly defined characteristics, needs and values, such generalities may not apply to the impact of teenpics. Various parental control groups seeking to limit

media options for teenagers base their actions on the firm belief that teenagers take the media quite literally, and that movies, television and rock music have a profound and specific pedagogical function. Since teenagers share a historical perspective that is fueled mainly by the media, teenpics may actually serve as cultural indoctrination films, showing teenagers models for success and failure in mainstream America. Perhaps current teenpics merely foster escapism as films about the rich and famous did during the Great Depression. A comparison of the function of such films would be another interesting study.

The conditions of attendance and the physical characteristics of film originally made it less accessible to audiences. The cross-pollination of media have produced offspring which have brought films, in general, and teenage films in particular to us whether we want them or not. One example of this cross-pollination was the creation of two Ferris Bueller clones for television in the programs "Parker Lewis Can't Lose" and the film namesake "Ferris Bueller's Day Off." Interestingly, the namesake died quickly, but the Parker Lewis show continues weekly emphasizing the same messages as the film on which it was based. On the radio, popular music stations play the music of popular musicians who are often featured in film soundtracks. Likewise, once a soundtrack is made for a film, the radio stations play it.

Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes' song, "I've Had The Time of My Life," from the soundtrack of the Patrick Swayze vehicle, Dirty Dancing was frequently aired as a single. In this way, radio and television both endorse film. Yet it is not only the programs themselves which increase our film awareness. Even advertising references films. Recently, for example, McDonald's has started selling cups featuring characters from (at the time of this writing) the yet-to-be-released Batman II. Thus, as the accessibility has been increased, the world of film should be considered as important a subject of study as music and television. Popular film is increasingly a part of our everyday environment and precisely because it is so easily dismissed as "mere entertainment" we may fail to realize what messages are being sent and received, what commendations taken and which rejected. Because they are the beneficiaries of this communication, it is important to give serious consideration to those cultural artifacts which are designed specifically for teenagers. Through comprehensive examination of the repeated representations in films and the perception of audiences, we may better understand the impact of teenpics on our social transformation.

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