NOSTALGIA FOR THE NEVER WAS: IDEALS OF FAMILY, NATION,
AND MASCULINITY IN THE BLOCKBUSTER FILMS OF THE REAGAN ERA

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

of

ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY
New York
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Date Submitted: <u>April 18, 2024</u>   Date Approved: <u>April 2, 2024</u>

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ABSTRACT

NOSTALGIA FOR THE NEVER WAS: IDEALS OF FAMILY, NATION, AND
MASCULINITY IN THE BLOCKBUSTER FILMS OF THE REAGAN ERA

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This dissertation offers a cultural history of the symbiotic relationship between
consumerism, nuclear war and the ideal of the nuclear family as these concepts are
reflected in popular film franchises launched in the 1980s during the heyday of Ronald
Reagan's presidency. Each chapter studies the strong correlation between blockbuster
film and Reagan's militarism, his invocations of family values, and most importantly, his
investment in turning American politics into a nostalgic movie promising a happy
Hollywood ending. Chapter One discusses James Cameron's *The Terminator* as a
warning for what can happen if a society is too reliant on technology and consumption
while simultaneously serving as a thrilling action-packed distraction from thinking too
critically about these issues. Chapter Two explores Robert Zemeckis' *Back to the Future*
as a celebration of technological progress and consumption within the nuclear family.
Chapter Three discusses the ways in which John McTiernan's *Die Hard* highlights
societal concerns about an evolving culture in terms of gender roles, corporate America
and terrorism. Chapter Four lays out how James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*
provides a meditation on how close America came to nuclear destruction without
sacrificing the audiences' craving for an adrenaline fueled special-effects blockbuster.
Finally, the fifth chapter is devoted to rides and attractions at Disney and Universal Parks

and highlights the growing societal distance between reality and illusion in terms of what people crave and try to emulate in their own lives, which only truly benefits those who produce and profit off of the illusions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank so many people for their encouragement of my writing, and more importantly, my growth as a writer and as a person. Although this dissertation was a labor of love, it certainly provided some challenges and the only way I was able to overcome them was through the steadfast dedication of my support team. I would first like to thank my advising committee from St. John's University English Department who have encouraged me since day one: Dr. Granville Ganter, Dr. Amy King and Dr. Stephen Paul Miller. Your insights and contributions to this project have been immensely helpful and rewarding to me as a scholar. Beyond that, your moral support and determinedness to help me finish this project means more to me than you will ever know. I would also like to thank the amazing secretary of the English Department, Lana Umali who has always been there for me anytime I've needed help of any kind. She is a consummate professional who is devoted to her job, but more importantly, to the students of the Department.

I would like to thank my future wife, Lizzie Mason, for her unwavering love and belief in me since day one. She has been there through it all, from my days of doubt and uncertainty to my days of self-confidence and everything in between. A huge thanks also to my future in-laws for making sure I had a quiet place to escape to write anytime I needed and kept me well fed and hydrated as well! My family has also cheered me on throughout this whole journey, but I would like to single out in particular my loving and protective mother Teresa, and my siblings Joseph, Michael and Kristin as well as my future brother-in-law John who are some of my closest confidantes and friends. This

program has also blessed me with lifelong friends, particularly Candice Belluscio, Daniel Perrone, Peter McKenna, Scott Koski, Joey Weisler and Amy Walsh. To say I couldn't do any of this without you all is an understatement. Thank you also to my many friends and family: I'm happy to say there are too many of you to mention, and extremely grateful for that fact.

I would like to close my dedications by paying tribute to several loved ones I have lost along this journey, including my beloved grandmother Helen and my dear uncle Jimmy. I remember at one point during my struggles with narrowing down my dissertation topic, my grandma Helen said: "They don't call it a Ph.D. for nothing". That has stayed with me and resonated over the years, along with many other words of wisdom of hers. Finally, this entire dissertation is dedicated to the life and legacy of my father, Michael Joseph Zwosta who passed away in 2018. My dad was the biggest supporter I ever had, and championed my journey toward my ultimate career goal of being a full-time English professor since I told him about this goal in 2015, just as he did every other decision his children ever made. My dad's life dream was to always become a full-time accounting professor but life (and four kids to support) got in the way and he settled on a different full-time career path. He was a dedicated employee of National Grid for many decades, but I could always tell his true passion was teaching. I look forward to having my Ph.D. in hand so that I can be one step closer to achieving a goal that he always strove for himself. I know my dad is still cheering me on from Heaven, but I wish he was physically here for this. Dad, this is for you. I love you forever.

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INTRODUCTION:

The Road to Nuclear War Is Paved with Good Consumerism: Hollywood as a

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While every work of art is ultimately a product of its era, the symbiotic relationship between American popular films of the 1980s and the dominant political landscape of the time was, and remains, one of the best illustrations of the undeniable impact of this symbiosis on American culture. This marriage is due in great part to the fact that America quite literally watched and participated in the first ever election of a former actor in the history of the country--- Ronald Reagan. Although he had many adversaries in his own time, and a great many more critics in the decades since his tenure as President, he nonetheless captured the hearts of many Americans and he ushered in a decade of excess, materialism and what many considered to be a feeling of unabashed patriotism that had dissipated in the administrations prior to him. Reagan promoted a sunny and simplistic patriotism and used it to his advantage, disenfranchising or continuing to disenfranchise many groups of people along the way especially those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum--- essentially anyone who did not conform to the ideology of consumerist patriotism that emblazoned the cultural landscape.

Many times, this worked wonders with the country as a whole, especially his ardent supporters. There were quite a few instances, however, that had quite the opposite effect, proving how out of touch Reagan truly was a wide swath of the American population and simultaneously proving the dangers of having citizens mindlessly conform to and believe in something just because an actor-turned-President told them to.

One of the most infamous and telling examples of this type of gaffe occurred when Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A. " rose to the top of the charts. Although on the surface it seems to be an anthem of pride and a tribute to a country of opportunities, it is actually a scathing indictment of the corruption and dubious ethics of a nation that always seems to end up prioritizing division and war over peace and true freedom. Reagan and his campaign team could not see past the ironic verses and misleading upbeat tone of the song and decided to embrace Springsteen at the height of his popularity as a shining example of what could happen if one works hard enough to succeed in the United States. At first, Springsteen tried to shrug this off but as time went on and Reagan and his team kept using Springsteen as a prop for their agenda, the singer famously blasted Reagan's administration at one of his concerts. The singer subtly alluded to the fact that Reagan was paying more attention to the beat of the song as opposed to the lyrics and then launched into a much more obscure song with a somber tempo that featured more pointed and less ironic lyrics than "Born in the U.S.A." has. Although this dissertation focuses mainly on the relationship between the American films of the 1980s and the dominant culture as opposed to other forms of popular culture, this example from top 40 music is one of the best examples that exist of the disparities that came out of this time period. The tempo of "Born in the U.S.A." seeming to indicate patriotism is in fact a perfect example of how Reaganite ideology as well as the blockbuster films released during the 1980s was steeped in surface-level appearances and images.

This dissertation will address how various popular films of the era grapple with the tenets of Reaganite ideology, namely consumerism, nuclear war, and masculinity. The characters of these films are faced with obstacles that somehow threaten their

personal lives, and sometimes even society as a whole: these conflicts are usually related to consumerism, technological interference, and/or defense. The films often featured characters whose primary motivations were to ascend the socioeconomic ladder through reverence to the capitalistic framework of the nation. Reagan, in turn, liked to consume and reference as many examples of popular culture as often as possible both to prove that he was in touch with the people and to keep fueling the production of media that supported his policies and personal values.

Many of Reagan's policies were actually steeped in Hollywood film ideas rather than political science, as explored in Michael Rogin's *Ronald Reagan: the Movie*. Rogin's astute argument that Reagan's political persona was inspired by, and indistinguishable from, his filmic persona due to a psychological shift from an embodied self to a simulacrum on film is reflected throughout many of the movies and ensuing movie "rides" explored throughout this dissertation. I argue that the popular entertainment of America is representative of the values and initiatives Reagan advocated for, which were in turn inspirational for the country in large part because of the selective nostalgic memory of the country. Film is one of the primary mediums through which these nostalgic images are disseminated, resulting in a reciprocal loop of consumption. Thus, the fact that Reagan was elected twice to the Presidency can be seen as the ultimate sign that there is an inextricable link between Hollywood and the White House that is troubling: that mediated images matter more than concrete ideas.

In my first chapter on James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984), I argue that the film expresses the ghost of a 1970s worry that America's technological war against Russia might get out of anyone's control and release a technological threat that no one

could control, resulting in nuclear Armageddon and the threat of being ruled by the artificial intelligence of our own machines. As much as this film articulates the danger of such technology---even down to the threat of what a telephone answering machine might become in the future---the film stages fighting the overwhelming threat of the Terminator as some kind of escapist joyride. As the romance of the two main characters make clear, the fruit of their loins only promises to beget more violence against machine violence, and the film never seriously apologizes for the havoc it indulges in. Nuclear war is terrifying, and our machines may be the end of us all, but the film suggests that in the end, it's just like fighting the Russians—it has to be done. The film's protagonist, Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton), morphs from a fairly shallow 1980s party girl who never really cares about anything, to a steely-eyed robot-killer, facing a grim future of nuclear war and killing many more robots. The film acknowledges the changing role of women in the 1980s, but it basically delivers audiences a soldier with a soft side who can breed. Even though the film can initially be read as a critique of Reagan's anti-Soviet militarism, it finally comes to embrace that position.

In chapter two, I turn to the fetishization of the American family in Robert Zemeckis' *Back to the Future* (1985). Although it is a light hearted film, it presents the ultimate wish fulfillment: the main character's attempt to make his life in 1985 better, and his somewhat bungling attempts to do so by travelling to 1955 and 2015. Along the way, the film traces the trajectory of the American family alongside of America's commercial development—it is rife with 1980s jokes about Calvin Klein underwear, Diet Pepsi, Adidas, mall shopping, and even blockbuster films like *Star Wars*. The film was reputed to be one of Reagan's favorites, shown numerous times in the White House,

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largely because it marketed a goofy, harmless, and deeply nostalgic vision of American middle class life in the 1980s, all the while training audiences to only care about the elevation of a lower middle-class white suburban family to the upper middle-class.

These first two chapters argue that both films deal with the themes of consumerism and nuclear war in vastly different ways. Whereas Cameron's film serves as a parable for the devastation nuclear war can have on the world, Zemeckis' film largely shelves those concerns, instead choosing to focus on the importance of the creation and maintenance of nuclear families to uphold capitalistic values of hard work and success in the business world. Although released roughly around the same time, the films almost seem as if they were released in vastly disparate times. One of the only threads that the films share in common is the conceit of time travel but they both use that conceit in much different ways. *The Terminator* uses time travel to showcase the bleak dystopian future that awaits humanity if it keeps heading down the tumultuous path it is on, whereas *Back to the Future* features time travel to highlight the socioeconomic perils and promise of one particular middle-class Californian family. Although one could certainly argue that *Back to the Future* also showcases the pitfalls of immersing oneself too fully in consumerism (after all, the time machine is itself made from a DeLorean, one of the biggest duds in consumer history), the main focus of the film is on the preservation and elevation of the middle class McFly family. Both films focus on family for drastically different reasons as well: in Cameron's film, the Connor family is formed by a futuristic soldier trying to defend humanity from extinction and his newfound lover who is destined to train their son to become the leader of the human resistance. Any salvation needs to be on a global scale in *The Terminator* whereas in *Back to the Future*, one very

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specific individual family unit is threatened but life as we know it is hardly at stake. Furthermore, the only two people that ever know the full extent of the ramifications time travel has in *Back to the Future* are time travel inventor Doc Brown and his protege, young Marty McFly whose family is the one threatened.

The next two chapters mainly focus on how multiple films respond to the changing political climate of America in the wake of the latter part of Reagan's second term, specifically in terms of his peace talks with new Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev. In chapter three, an examination of the John McTiernan's *Die Hard* (1988), I show that the film's streetwise New York cop hero probably best illustrates the thesis of Susan Jeffords' *Hard Bodies*, which is an exploration of how film characters of the 1980s embody a kind of mythic heroism with which Reagan tried to endow himself. Trying to save his marriage at the same time he foils an international bank heist ring over one long Christmas holiday night, the main character plays both a tough American (as if he were in a western) doing battle with foreigners, whether they be Japanese businessmen (who have built the skyscraper he is trying to defend), or the quasi-German bank robbers who are trying to steal Japanese money. Despite its remarkable and arresting action sequences, the film itself is a fairly conventional patriotic vehicle celebrating American grit and innovation with its most difficult cultural work addressing how this cowboy-hero has to re-tool his old behavior to make room for the business wife of the Reagan era.

Chapter Four turns to James Cameron's surprisingly domestic sequel *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) where the martial logic of the first film seems to have come up short. The weightlifting, hard bodied heroine Sarah Connor, has become so obsessed with preventing Armageddon that she is willing to kill anyone who gets in her way. Her

former enemy, the Terminator, has suddenly been reprogrammed to help, and the film completely inverts the technophobia of its predecessor. In this chapter, I argue that *Terminator 2* actually softens Susan Jeffords' insight into "hard bodied" masculinity of the earlier Reagan era, trying to re-build domestic affection as it retreats from its militarism. Its place in Reagan's America, however, is that it "befriends" the original Terminator, turning it into a useful political tool that volunteers to destroy itself when its services are no longer needed, as America's military was able to stand down after the fall of the Soviet Union. As the Terminator descends into the molten pit, it raises its thumb patriotically in a selfless act of validating Reagan's vision.

At their most critical points, both films have plotlines that use the tense former relationship between the US and Russia to show audiences how fickle alliances can be and how much damage can be caused as a result. In the case of *Terminator 2*, the Terminator once again played by Arnold Schwarzenegger now has a mission to protect the Connor family and points out to John and Sarah that it's in humans' nature to destroy themselves. Similarly, *Die Hard* features villains that use America's checkered history of imperialism and the enemies it's incurred over the years to its advantage. Although released a year or so after the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty was signed in 1987, the screenwriters based main villain Hans Gruber off of the Red Army, a Communist group that Gorbachev remained wary about after the peace talks. Gruber initially was a member of a fictional Communist terrorist group fashioned after the Red Army but has since decided to focus solely on his own financial interests. He knows, however, that everyone will automatically assume he has political goals in mind and uses this to his advantage. By the time the credits roll, the main law enforcement agencies are

still clueless and only John and Holly ultimately piece together what motivations he truly had. This chapter analyzes numerous scenes from each film, as well as individual characters from each film, in order to show how these films capture and reflect the sociopolitical and socioeconomic ethos of the late 1980s in America while simultaneously providing the thrills and excitement expected of blockbuster films.

In my final chapter, I address the commercial underbelly of the entire Reagan era blockbuster film by examining the urge at Disney and Universal to turn these films into theme park "rides." This transformation happened slowly: at first, parks like Kings Island had rides with simple themes like *Peanuts*, a clear commercial tie-in to a well-known children's cartoon but quite distinct from them. Disney and Universal have upped the ante to create entirely simulated "rides" which may indeed have roller coaster-like elements, but now primarily feature "virtual" rides where audiences experience a film-like "ride" without moving at all. The "rides" feature extensive video reworking of the films, both before and during the "rides" with theme park personnel sometimes also acting the parts of film characters. Drawing from the work of Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco, I argue that these rides create a "doubled" nostalgia, or a sort of hall of mirrors where the ride mirrors the nostalgia for the film and vice versa. If the blockbuster film of the Reaganite 1980s really marketed the political and commercial fantasies of their age, these rides have reduced the entire blockbuster experience to its most basic form: a ride. Simultaneously, the shows and rides at these theme parks indoctrinate guests to thrill and revel in the power of innovative consumerist ideology by both showcasing examples of it in rides like the Carousel of Progress at Disney World, and by having

audience members superficially play the roles of protagonists from the films various rides and attractions are based off.

Most of the theme park rides discussed in this chapter are rides that are either based off of films or rides that spawned films, but others such as Walt Disney's Carousel of Progress, are discussed as well. Just as the previous chapters discussed how various films dealt with themes of consumerism and nuclear war, this chapter discusses how theme park rides finesse these concepts. Although most theme park rides are not as blatant in their messaging as films are, since they are designed to be fun and escapist adventures featuring fan-favorite characters and scenarios, they nonetheless do not exist in a bubble and thus inevitably grapple with deeper issues whether they address them directly or not. One of the main attractions discussed in this chapter is *T2:3D- Battle Across Time*, which is the attraction that probably comes closest to directly addressing a deep societal concern (nuclear war), but even in this attraction most of its criticism falls on an army of villainous machines and not on the humans who ultimately are responsible for creating the objects of their destruction. Still, these rides are perhaps the clearest examples depicted throughout this dissertation of America's reliance on immersive consumerism to both justify and cope with its equally obsessive compulsions to maintain the military industrial complex. Although actual wars are hardly ever explicitly addressed other than in infotainment attractions such as the Hall of Presidents, it is heavily implied by numerous rides that "dark forces" often threaten American innovation and society as a whole.

Ronald Reagan himself epitomized everything both Walt Disney himself and his theme parks (among others) stood for. Both men championed American production and

consumption and used the magic of illusion and the unspoken language of cinema in order to prove the power of individual imaginations and how people's imaginations could help bolster innovation. Both started in the movie-making industry and their later endeavors would constantly borrow from and repurpose their old work in order to successfully grow their empires. Although on the surface Reagan and Disney presided over vastly different areas of American culture, this chapter delves into how much the political and entertainment worlds can overlap and even keep each other afloat. As an actor, Ronald Reagan was on hand at Disneyland's opening day in 1955 to greet the first customers as one of America's favorite Hollywood stars. It almost seemed predestined that one day Ronald Reagan would walk through the gates of Walt Disney World one day and give a speech to young future leaders of America in which he encouraged the youth to channel their computer and video game know-how into direct patriotic service and join the Army. Perhaps ironically and perhaps just a sign of just how inextricable real life was from the movies in Reagan's America, the Matthew Broderick action movie *War Games* came out the exact same year as this speech and featured a strikingly similar premise. While it is true that there have always been intersections between the media and politics, the 1980s was the clearest example of how nothing exists in a vacuum and proved just how symbiotic of a relationship exists between these different spheres of influence. Most if not all of the attractions in the 1980s at mega theme parks especially Universal and Disney reinforced Reaganite ideology but even before Reagan existed politically, the parks' rides and attractions featured similar messaging both blatantly and subliminally and ever since he left office as well. This chapter will address this phenomenon as well and prove why all roads seem to point back to Reagan: the place where he became

popular in the first place, Hollywood, is America's true locus of power and influence and not Washington, DC. The dreams talked about by politicians in Washington are often untenable for a vast majority of American people so people turn to films to watch fictional characters live out the dreams most of them cannot attain themselves. The theme park industry bridges the gap slightly between the films of Hollywood and the unfulfilled dreams of the American people by being able to immerse consumers better into the fictional worlds where dreams always come true, or at least almost always.

The most basic function of blockbuster films is to provide visceral thrills and storytelling often takes a backseat to this fact. Furthermore, rides and attractions at theme park are made to physically and viscerally move people, and therefore storytelling and messaging is even less important. Still, it is undeniable that many popular films and rides featured at Disney and Universal Parks dabble with themes that are relevant to everyday life in corporate America. This dissertation explores how the reciprocal relationship between consumers and producers of illusions is toxic, and it is important to pay attention and take note of what those in positions of power want us to believe by paying attention to both what they say and show as well as to what they leave out of the conversation.

CHAPTER ONE:

The Love of Death:

The Death Drive of *The Terminator* and the Post Apocalyptic Family

This chapter will explore how James Cameron's science-fiction thriller *The Terminator* (1984) engages with the threat of nuclear war, through a lens of hypermasculinity and technophobia. Reagan's dangerous rhetoric about foreign threats, especially the Soviet Union, was heating up in the early 1980s, and this film can be seen as a parable for coping with the specter of global destruction looming. The Terminator is a hyper masculine harbinger of death, the ultimate piece of consumer technology originally built to destroy foreign threats, but its decision to view all of humanity as a threat forces audiences to reflect on the ethics of not only Reagan's rhetoric, but also the terminating action he is prepared to take if necessary. Many spectacle-based, action-packed movies were released during Reagan's tenure, but few feature social commentary on the same level as *The Terminator*. Far from the typical militaristic Reaganite wish-fulfillment fantasy the era ushered in, this film both warns of unchecked military technological expansion and provides a thrill of indulging in it at the same time. The film's emotional but unconventional love story is juxtaposed against the cold, calculating actions of the Terminator, a foreign robot enemy that actually represents America's own self-destructive impulses. Protagonist Sarah Connor epitomizes the problematic nature of this issue in that the film gradually tracks her loss of innocence and femininity, while Kyle Reese is forced to learn how to negotiate his broken warrior spirit with feelings of love and passion for the first time in his life. In this love story, Sarah and Kyle's future

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"family" is actually constituted out of their fight---a family that will spawn violence even as it opposes it. This analysis covers how traditional concepts of femininity and masculinity have contributed to the dependence on nuclear family in American culture, and how the Reese/Connor family is a representation of the problems that can arise from this. The formation of the world's first post-nuclear family, which is ruptured before the couples' son is even born, speaks to the increasingly volatile and dangerous nature of advocating for the maintenance of these types of family units in the name of preserving the spirit of capitalism and, by extension, democracy itself. The trials and tribulations both physically and emotionally of the main two protagonists of *The Terminator*, Kyle Reese and Sarah Connor, are indicative of the psychological and ecological ramifications of nuclear posturing. Furthermore, Kyle and Sarah having to be warrior post-nuclear parents as opposed to being allowed to be a typical nuclear family shows how the latter type of family is not really as carefree as it seems and how the concept of a nuclear family itself is deeply political and can even be deadly.

A toxic gift from the future, the plot of *The Terminator* focuses on two equally violent characters beamed back from the future: a robot sent to kill the mother of a boy who will threatens the robot's future-world, and a man sent to destroy the robot before he can kill the mother. The film is particularly noteworthy for the pitiless violence the Terminator wreaks on Los Angeles and innocent people, showing no compassion for anyone in his obsession to kill Sarah Connor. His opponent, Kyle Reese, has to meet the Terminator's violence with violence of his own, and when he falls in love with the women he is supposed to protect, she too becomes quite a soldier. As soon as the two forces from the future arrive, they both set their sights on tracking down a young waitress

named Sarah Connor. The first "man" makes his way to the club Sarah is holed up in, called Tech Noir, where he/it tries to assassinate Sarah just as the second man springs into action to save her. Sarah and the protector flee and the protector tells Sarah who he is and what he is trying to save her from. He reveals that his name is Kyle Reese and he is a soldier from the future sent back by her future son to protect her from the clutches of the assassin. Reese reveals that Skynet, an artificial intelligence system built as part of an American defense network, turned on its creators and decided that all of humanity was a threat and launched an all-out nuclear war. For the rest of the film, Kyle and Sarah do their best to evade the Terminator until ultimately he catches up with them and a final battle begins. After shooting at The Terminator and throwing several pipe bombs at him, Kyle slides a pipe bomb into the tanker's hose tube that the Terminator has hijacked, causing the flesh to burn from the machine's endoskeleton. Finally, Kyle and Sarah lure the Terminator into a factory where Reese sacrifices himself by jamming a final pipe bomb into the Terminator's midsection, which blows the Terminator into pieces and Kyle dies amidst the explosion. Finally, just as Sarah thinks it is over, the still-functional torso of the machine grabs Sarah and tries to strangle her, but she crushes the machine in a hydraulic press. Months later, a visibly pregnant Sarah heads toward Mexico, aware that the battle has just begun.

The relationship between Kyle and Sarah is championed by their son in the future, which prompts him to send Kyle back, although neither Kyle or Sarah know that Reese is destined to be John's father. In other words, the romantic plot between Sarah and Kyle is essentially about producing a "son" out of this death struggle with the Terminator. Although there is a desire on both of their parts, the cruel reality of the war-ravaged

present and future prevent Sarah and Reese from forming a traditional loving nuclear family as championed by Reagan's administration. Although there is love depicted in the film, it is love birthed out of trauma and war, most effectively realized when by the end of the film the camera tracks a visibly pregnant and determined Sarah Connor embarking on a perilous journey without the protection of Reese and she is very clearly going to give birth to a child whose whole life will be defined by war.

Ironically, in a tragically poetic manner, the same political forces that championed nuclear families as a great domestic defense against foreign threats ultimately started the war between humanity and the machines, and as such, "unwittingly" would go on to obliterate countless nuclear families in the aftermath. Reese sacrifices his life in the hope that Sarah and John can thwart the threat of Skynet once and for all, even if it means that he himself will never be "born" or reborn thanks to the mediation of time travel. Kyle willingly ruptures his post nuclear family so that the rest of humanity doesn't have to resort to becoming post-nuclear families. It is not only Kyle's life meaning that is fully realized through his death, it's the meaning of life in the nuclear age in general: if the original timeline of events in the series takes place, the obsessive American need to ensure the preservation of the nuclear family has paradoxically led to its destruction. Kyle Reese's death is necessary on a narrative level since a happy ending for Kyle and Sarah would undercut the urgent message it seeks to provide its audience: his death both proves that the concept of the "nuclear family" is indeed deeply and troublingly indebted to America's dependence on nuclear buildup to in the name of defense of capitalism and that as a result, eventually all the concepts fought for in the name of capitalism (family, class status, and so on) will become irrelevant and only attempts at survival will matter.

Sarah's life at the beginning of the film is unsatisfying and bleak: she is somewhat lost and does not have many life goals other than getting by. Her life is punctuated by canceled dates, excruciatingly long shifts at a thankless job and her main source of affection comes from her caged iguana. 1980s Los Angeles is shown to be crass, shallow, and largely boring. In many shots, Sarah's face is shown in close-up and there is a vacant look of desperation on her face that seems to be permanent. Although the technologies that will come to invade her life pose dire threats, the unlikely romance that develops between her and another outcast, time traveler Kyle Reese, becomes a refuge for Sarah and a bright spot in an otherwise dreary existence. Cameron's decision to make Sarah's life boring and almost pointless speaks volumes about the real world concerns being echoed throughout the film: Reagan was on the brink of starting World War III to preserve the "American way of life," so showing characters as sullen and blank as Sarah and her coworkers at the diner is enough to make one wonder what quality of life that even was. Sarah doesn't seem too attached to material things, preferring to spend quality time with her pet iguana and joke with her roommate about the disappointing men in their lives. She uses a motorcycle solely to commute to and from work, which helps to prove that the prototypical consumerist life of the 1980s disappoints her: her motorcycle is a mode of transportation to get back and forth from a lackluster job, not a vehicle for joyrides, and this is further established when a date stands her up and she is shown roaming around a dingy, disgusting Los Angeles at night by herself. At work earlier in the day, a moment ostensibly played for laughs but masking deeper, pervasive societal concerns occurs when Sarah is watching news coverage of the aforementioned womans' murder who had the same name as her: a sardonic coworker quips "Look at it this way, in

a hundred years, who's gonna care?" There is more nuance to this than meets the eye: although Sarah's coworker is trying to get her friends' mind off of a murder that she feels doesn't affect Sarah's life at all, in actuality the murder being reported is a great example of the films' overall message that ignorance and apathy are two of the most dangerous qualities that humans possess. Furthermore, the co-workers' matter-of-fact line indicates that there is not much worth fighting for in this society that prioritizes business dealings and home defense over personal lives and emotional security.

From this dull commercial life comes a technology that will kill. A scene that perfectly illustrates the rise of the machines in the first place occurs shortly after the Terminator's violent arrival in Los Angeles. Before the Terminator makes his way to the right Sarah Connor, he executes two other women with the same name to be systematic since his files do not specify which Sarah Connor is the mother of the future savior of humanity. One of these women is killed on-screen, and the scene begins with a wide shot of a suburban street block that shows multiple children playing outside with toys. Suddenly, as the camera pans over to a toy truck, the Terminator's car runs over the truck: a close-up shot appropriately shows one big machine destroying another, which foreshadows the final showdown at the factory between Sarah and the Terminator. The Terminator then gets out of the car and menacingly observes the scene which now includes wrong Sarah Connor's barking Pomeranian. He makes his way to the door, knocks and waits for Sarah to come to the door. When she answers, he kicks the door open and breaks the lock that had been separating the Terminator from the housewife he proceeds to mercilessly gun down.

This scene mirrors the fears many American citizens were trained to develop about the Soviet threat, and it is also compounded with the threat of a foreign technology. The Terminator is both an accented "other" as well as the future of our own American machinery. Although the Terminator was not even originally going to be played by an actor with a foreign accent, the ultimate decision to cast Schwarzenegger in the role proved to be poignant and eerily effective. Although it is tempting to view the Terminator as the catalyst for all of the evil acts depicted throughout the film, ultimately he is just a machine following orders. It is important to resist the urge to cast all judgment on the Terminator and realize that this killing spree would not be occurring were it not for the American military's decision to develop the ultimate weapon against their foreign enemies. All of the carnage wrought by the killing machine was ultimately ironically caused by America's misguided focus on extreme defense tactics. If more time was spent on constructive dialogue as opposed to always thinking in terms of violence first, the bloodshed could've been spared. Of course, in the real world, such constructive dialogue would eventually surface, thankfully because if it hadn't, nuclear war would've likely become a sobering reality for all of humanity, including countless innocent people. Similarly, Kyle Reese is not a machine but he has had to relegate his emotions to the background in order to defend humanity, but the film makes it increasingly known that America's emphasis on technology and defense in the name of capitalism had ironically gotten them farther and farther away from the concept of humanity. It is important to remember that the Terminators were indeed originally designed to destroy human beings, but only the enemies of America: which indeed begs the question of how in touch a

society can be with humanity if their decisions can be as heartless as the machines they programmed.

Freud's theory on the death drive and masochism can be helpful here: in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," he posits that humans have a compulsive desire to control the circumstances of their own deaths, namely by trying to actively avoid dying in dangerous situations. From there, he discusses how humans are masochistic, having a self-injuring tendency which vindicates the death instinct: "The compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never, even long ago, have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since been repressed" (Freud 20). Ultimately, it seems like humans do have a primal desire to defend and protect which leads to a equal parts desire to repress and relive. Kyle's constant flash-forwards are the films' best example of this: he seems to both relish and revile his campaign against Skynet as he regales Sarah with various stories from his time. As much as he longs for the destruction of Skynet, he is also forced to deal with the fact that his whole identity is as a soldier, and even without war, he might still not be truly at peace. The saber-rattling polemics of leaders like Reagan also give credence to Freud's theories, as Reagan called himself anti-nuclear war while at the same time increasing America's nuclear abilities.

The brutality of the Terminator is nowhere more apparent than a scene in which The Terminator drives his car through a police station window in pursuit of Sarah Connor, and kills seventeen police officers in his hunt. The scene is quite potent because the police is typically considered to be one of the main forces that keep American society safe, but in this case they are absolutely powerless against this machine that only exists

because it was originally designed with defense in mind. The scene is equal parts horrifying and thrilling, a concrete visualization of many Americans' worst nightmare: systematic murder by a relentless force, and the horror is doubly felt since it is inflicted upon a group of protectors. This scene perfectly reflects the tenets of Freud's death drive: the fine line between defense and assault is drawn by a machine who was originally programmed to protect the people it is now actively murdering. Still, Sarah learning the dangers of America's hyper-focus on safety, especially on guns and nuclear weapons, underscores the fact that Terminators were designed to kill people. Furthermore, the kinetic tone of the scene is indicative of the slippery slope that is humans' obsession with death and destruction. Although Carol Clover's seminal book *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* does not explicitly discuss the events of *The Terminator* franchise, it can be viewed as a techno-slasher film since the film does closely adhere to many of the tenets of Clover's theory:

> The new prominence of women is the structural effect of a greater investment in the victim function… modern horror seems especially interested in the trials of everyperson, and everyperson is on his or her own in facing the menace, without help from the authorities…it is not only in their capacity as victims that these women appear in these films. They are, in fact, protagonists in the full sense: they combine the functions of suffering victim and avenging hero (Clover 17).

Although it is problematic that Sarah is depicted as helpless up until Reese teaches her how to be a fighter, her learning journey throughout the film proves to her through her victimhood that the system is flawed and has now sentenced her to a lifetime of peril: her own life, that of her son's and the very survival of mankind is now on the

line. Sarah, the final girl, learns how to become an effective killer whenever necessary in the name of protecting her family, thus allowing the death drive to prevail yet again.

Whereas Reagan focused his attention on praising successful businessmen and innovators who embodied in his opinion a good reason to stay the course in terms of nuclear ambition, he neglected the outcasts of society. The death scenes of the punks early in the film serve as both the Terminators' first victims and a powerfully concrete example of the menacing nature of the machine: one of their hearts is ripped from the persons' body, another of them is killed by being slammed forcefully into a metallic gate and the third persons' fate is left ambiguous but the last image of him shows him cowering in fear on the floor handing over his clothes to the very "man" he was taunting less than a minute earlier. The Terminator kills off these "punks" with as much gusto as Clint Eastwood. Audience expectations are subverted right away as in most movies punks are depicted as a menacing force, but here they rendered powerless almost immediately, not to mention the fact that even if Schwarzenegger's character was human, his presence would still be intimidating as Schwarzenegger's physique was at its peak in the early 1980s due to his bodybuilding. The subversive twist of making the punks a non-threat not only accentuates the Terminators' lethalness, but it also serves as an early example of showcasing one particularly ethically murky facet of the film: the Terminator sometimes dispatches people the audience might enjoy seeing killed, further solidifying the allure of the death drive. M. Keith Booker, a Professor of English at University of Arkansas, is the author of a book called *Alternate Americas* that highlights several popular science-fiction films of the past fifty years paying careful attention to films' ability to mirror the fears and hopes of humanity. Talking about the punk scene, Booker finds it "perfectly

appropriate to take the scene as a commentary on contemporary urban violence and decay- and perhaps even as a criticism of the Reagan administration's lack of emphasis on aid to cities" (Booker 195). Whereas most films of the era highlighted the most aesthetically pleasing aspects of Reagan's America, *The Terminator* takes its time before it becomes an adrenaline-fueled chase film to show the reality of what a good portion of Los Angeles, and by extension most big cities of America, really looked and felt like. The city is populated with punks, homeless men and disillusioned looking store clerks and waitresses, all of which is meant to make us wonder just how much this society is truly worth fighting for.

Another death early in the film which showcases technological betrayal represented by relentlessness of the Terminator is the death of Sarah's roommate Ginger (Bess Motta) and her boyfriend Matt (Rick Rossovich). The scene features multiple betrayals by technology, starting with Ginger's murder. The Terminator has tracked down Sarah's address using a phone book and casually opens the side door to Ginger's bedroom, and brutally murders Matt after a very short altercation where Matt thinks a baseball bat will help his odds at defeating the home infiltrator. Ginger walks back from the kitchen to the bedroom listening to music with headphones as the phone rings, spots Matt's body being flung across the room and locks eyes with the Terminator. As the machine shoots Ginger multiple times thinking she might be Sarah, the phone rings again (Sarah had tried earlier also but Ginger and Matt were too busy having sex while listening to yet another machine, a radio) and the answering machine picks up: "Ginger can't hear the phone ring because she is listening to music on a portable device (a machine) with headphones… the calls are repeatedly answered by Sarah and Ginger's

machine, including one witty moment when Sarah's call is picked up by the machine just after the brutal murder of Ginger" (Booker 195). These two technological betrayals happening within seconds of each other speak to overreliance on technology even in 1984, and the anachronistic presence of the titular machine intimates the fact that this reliance will ultimately get the better of humanity as a whole. Victims like Ginger are mere preludes to the anarchy that might be lurking in the distance. A line of Sarah's that ironically plays on the answering machine while her roommate is being gunned down post-coitus is rife for analysis along those lines: "Machines need love, too, so talk to it". American citizens' dependence on technological convenience and consumerism comes with a price that few take the time to consciously think about very often: the fact that such consumption is a political act in that America could continue to make advances in technological warfare in the name of preserving and spreading the ideals of capitalistic values. This expansion has consequences in both the real world, including casualties in numerous proxy conflicts that sprung out of the Cold War, and within the world of the film, such as Ginger's death. Furthermore, the ultimate consequence in both cases would be nuclear obliteration.

Fittingly, Reagan's plans for a Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) had just been put forth in March 1983, which painted him as a concerned and level-headed leader who was deeply afraid of nuclear war and its potential implications. However, the same month he referred to the Soviet Union as an "Evil Empire" for the second time publicly, fueling the flames of division and potential nuclear turmoil even as he claimed he was trying to diminish the risk of global destruction. The initiative was dubbed "Star Wars" by the press, fitting due to the fact that Reagan's simplistic rhetoric about foreign countries

boiled down to Manichean all good and all evil logic, very much matching that of the *Star Wars* franchise, with the tentpoles of "the force" and "the dark side" diametrically opposing one another. SDI would have been an armed system with X-ray lasers that would detect any nukes headed toward the United States, and Reagan argued that it could have made nuclear weapons obsolete. Ultimately, the project was worked on for years even after Reagan left office, but was ultimately scrapped by President Clinton for being too expensive and impractical. The project concurrently made Reagan and his administration seem virtuous by having the idea and implied the superior but oxymoronic nuclear morality of the United States at the same time. This combined with the fact that the initiative seemed like something out of a science-fiction film is quite fitting to any discussion of the Reaganite era.

Whereas Ginger is presented as a sexually promiscuous woman who does not seem to take life too seriously, Sarah Connor is presented as a lost and lonely person before her life is upended and she learns from Kyle Reese just how important she is to the survival of humanity. Still, her use value to the story is mostly rooted in her reproductive value since the Terminator is ultimately only after her because she is destined to give birth to the future leader of mankind's resistance. Her characters' growth throughout the series is almost always shown in direct correlation to her maternal instincts. Although she now has been told what her purpose in life is, it is profoundly sad that she was never given a real choice in the matter. Sarah was told what was expected of her by a rugged, war-ravaged alpha male who himself is a proxy of the ultimate male warrior and leader of mankind. One scene that directly precedes a scene of intimacy which non-coincidentally also marks the conception of John Connor shows Kyle Reese teaching Sarah how to

make pipe bombs. This scene, along with many others, shows the equal importance in the world of *The Terminator* of physical connection with people you love and physical action to defeat one's enemies.

   The Terminator is not genuinely criticizing technology and consumerism as much as it is faking a political moral in the service of a thrill ride of a shootout. Kyle struggles to merely stay alive and the future of mankind hangs in the balance of everything he does. Kyle's heroic predicament adheres nicely to the tenets of Frankfurt School theorist Siegfried Kracauer's "Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies" were it to be updated to include 1980s stock film characters: in this essay, Kracauer presents numerous boilerplate types of stories studios of his time were pushing that did nothing but subliminally perpetuate the goals of the ruling class: "Films are the mirror of the prevailing society. They are financed by corporations, which must pinpoint the tastes of the audience at all costs in order to make a profit. Since this audience is composed largely of workers and ordinary people who gripe about the conditions in the upper circles, business considerations require the producer to satisfy the need for social critique among the consumers" (Kracauer 291). There is a fine line between social critique in film and actual social change, a line which if crossed would fundamentally put the concept of capitalism in jeopardy. This fine line existed before Kracauer pointed it out, and still exists today: it is a fact about the entertainment industry which is crucial to note for the purposes of this chapter. Before turning back to how specifically Kyle's predicament adheres to the prototype of the Little Shopgirls, it is prudent to first explain the essentials of Kracauer's theory.

Indicting the melodramatic plot archetypes perpetuating the goals of the ruling class, Kracauer establishes how film studios subliminally and occasionally explicitly do so. Unrealistic plots such as a maid marrying the owner of a Rolls Royce pervaded films of Kracauer's era, and such unlikely plots still persist today. Kracauer does note, however, that sometimes even unrealistic plots end up conveying deep societal truth in the process of being disingenuous. He also notes how films often revel in depicting former time periods in order to both convey a sense that the old days were more perfect than they really were and also to distract audiences from engaging with the social problems of their own era. The daydreams of reality indeed come to the fore and otherwise repressed wishes come to light. Most importantly, the movies may contain a suggestion of social critique to appeal to the masses but will avoid explicit denunciation of societal norms and values. They will also typically offer protagonists which are able to transcend their social classes in order to appease audiences and prevent them from campaigning for widespread real reform.

Although Kracauer's theory argues that films employ the past in order to avoid meaningful conversation about the present, the same can apply to the future as *The Terminator* makes abundantly clear. Though it does contain a social critique about hyper-reliance on consumerist technology, its message is diluted by an ending which offers up Kyle as a sacrificial lamb to "bad technology" in order to allow final girl Sarah Connor to learn that knowledge and proper use of good technology can mitigate the harm caused by society's dangerous death driven dalliance with bad technology. Kyle represents a dire and grim "possible future" as he calls it--- it is heavily implied that if the military industrial complex continues making decisions that prioritize strategic technological

defense over civil discussion and practical planning, this "possible future" or one even worse than it will emerge. Although Kyle's story serves as a parable of what can happen when too much of an emphasis is put on technological advancement and defense, it also presents it as a worst possible scenario in order to accentuate the danger posed to the protagonists of the film and the end of the film does feature responsible use of technology avenging his death as previously mentioned. While somewhat of a social critique is made by featuring the tragic story of Kyle Reese and showing how he really had no life other than being a soldier, his sacrifice is depicted as cautiously optimistic, implying that if Sarah continues to lead by example and use technology responsibly, future calamity can be avoided or mitigated by careful intervention. This, of course, leaves the door open for sequels, and there is perhaps no better way to accentuate Kracauer's point: popular film characters can be shown to engage with issues that mirror the real world, but this engagement is not truly authentic by virtue of both the fictional universes the films are a part of and the fact that individual heroic actions are shown to solve the problems posed in the films whereas real life scenarios require significant sociopolitical change.

Cameron's film drives home the message that the soulless mechanisms of the military industrial complex has the potential to lead the very civilians it seeks to "protect" straight to the proverbial slaughterhouse. *The Terminator* both issues a putative "warning" about the spread of technology, but celebrates it and indulges in it at the same time. In addition, The Terminator features a fair amount of product placement including a strategic use of Nike shoes, subtly showing that smart and deliberate consumption can help to save lives. The shoes are worn by deliberate time-traveler Kyle Reese to allow him to run toward and save Sarah Connor from the clutches of the Terminator in order to

ensure the lineage of the family who will be humanity's last hope against the sentient machines of Skynet. Kyle Reese wears them out of necessity and desperation. Although conspicuous consumerism is not a main concern of the film, consumer products are featured, usually in the form of a machine that is helpful or dangerous to the main characters, whether it be a telephone, an answering machine or a watch. This helps to make the threat of the Terminator more palpable and menacing, as it becomes increasingly clear that these Terminators were always designed to kill, but were meant to offer the ultimate form of protection to American citizens as a defense system. Essentially, they were designed to protect the American way of life, in a similar way that technology like phones and cars are designed to help keep this life functioning. If Skynet had decided to target any group of people the American programmers told it to, no one in America was expected to bat an eyelash in the eyes of the military industrial complex. The movie cleverly and subtly incorporates hints of the slippery slope between helpful and harmful technology, most effectively when Kyle Reese has encounters with 1984-era technology such as bulldozers and hydraulic presses.

The film shows what happens when humans combine the best parts of technology with the worst characteristics of humanity. Throughout the film, various pieces of tech are shown being utilized such as hairdryers, answering machines and more. They exist to serve a purpose, usually to make citizens' lives easier in terms of getting them ready for work or dates. Those are the only two modes of humanity really on display in this world, even before the killer machine from the future begins his reign of terror. In a book devoted to explaining how computers acted as metaphors and political icons in relation to the Cold War, historian Paul Edwards notes how: "A rising tide of robot-based

automation in industry, a new wave of computerization in workplaces based on new personal-computer technology, and the Strategic Computing Initiative's controversial proposals for autonomous weapons matched the film's theme of domination by intelligent machines. (Indeed one of the film's more effective devices is the constant visual reference to machines and computers: robots, cars, toy trucks, televisions, telephones, answering machines, Walkmans, personal computers.)" (Edwards 25). On a macro-level, the hyper-focused attention on ramping up nuclear capabilities and other feats of technological defense is alarming, but more insidious and omnipresent is actually a much more intimate fact: that human beings have become so dependent on technological convenience that machines were in control long before Skynet was even conceived of as an experimental program.

The convenience of consumerist products and services has a direct correlation with the efficiency of life in general, so it makes sense that the same would be true on a larger scale level in terms of military technology. Reagan certainly championed both causes vocally and sternly, which is a major factor in how he won the Presidency twice in a row. In an October 1980 political debate against sitting President Carter, Reagan called out Carter's downplaying of the importance of American consumption asking the audience if they were better off than they were before Carter was elected, and implied that if they did not feel they were, the only solution was to vote for Reagan to allow him to usher back in a return to proper capitalist values. In regards to Cameron's film, the consequences of Reagan's excessive push for the preservation of capitalist thought and activity and militaristic maintenance of these values comes to a head in the final conflicts Kyle and Sarah face. Edwards offers thought-provoking insight into how the film

navigates the choppy waters of nuclear politics which ends up showing Reese and the Terminator as mirror images of each other: "The Terminator is the enemy, but he is also the self, the military killing machine Kyle too has become- and that Sarah herself must become in order for humanity to survive. Reese and the Terminator are twisted mirror images caught in a deadly dance: humans have built subjective, intelligent military machines, but are reduced to a militaristic, mechanical, emotionless subjectivity in order to fend off their own products" (Edwards 23). Unchecked hubris in the name of progress has led to the perilous and deadly situation the protagonists have found themselves in. Kyle's life has been so plagued with destruction and war that he is forced to repress his emotions in order to carry out his mission, but at the same time he can only convince himself he is machine-like for so long before he cracks: before finally opening up to Sarah through the physical act of lovemaking, as action is the only effective language in the eyes of a war-ravaged soldier, Kyle angrily stuffs the pipe bombs in his bag that will ultimately end his life the same way he has always lived it: at war.

One poignant scene that shows the potential aftermath of military technology gone awry takes place as Kyle is traversing the underground tunnels used to hide from Terminators, Hunter-Killer machines and other Skynet harbingers of death. As Kyle wearily walks the tunnels after returning from patrol duty, he witnesses a number of heartbreaking instances of children coping in different ways with the reality of their post-nuclear lifestyles: one little boy gleefully smiles as he picks up a rat that is clearly meant to serve as his dinner for the night, one set of children gather around a broken television set that is acting as a makeshift fireplace, and perhaps most hauntingly, a little girl points a make-believe gun at Kyle, pretending he's a Terminator. Kyle plays along with her,

pointing his real gun toward her to continue the role play scenario. A scene in *Terminator 2* also features a pretend gunfight scene, this time between two young brothers which is broken up by their mother who sternly tells them that if they don't stop, she's going to wring both of their necks. This is followed by John Connor wondering if people are even going to make it in the long run with their propensity for violence. The reprogrammed Terminator astutely observes that it is in our nature to destroy ourselves. Although aggression existed in mankind long before the introduction of nuclear weapons into the equation, this "advancement" in technology certainly blurred the lines even further between progress and regression. When it is taken into consideration that the proliferation of nuclear weapons happened in the first place as a result of American militaristic desire to spread and protect the ideals of capitalism at all costs in the name of democracy, the situations Kyle encounters in the tunnel are even more heart-wrenching. They serve as a warning for the real society watching the events of the film unfold: to be aware of the fact that unchecked progress in the name of democracy can be dangerous and can cause more problems that it solves.

The film provides numerous flashforwards such as the one above (as opposed to the typical narrative storytelling device of flashbacks) to emphasize the peril characters face within the milieu of 2029 LA, and this future peril is a pre-warning to characters in the 1980s timeline of the grim fates that likely await them. These apocalyptic scenes featuring futuristic shootouts and menacing drone attacks are both somewhat frightening glimpses of a dark foreboding future, and depicted as really cool at the same time. This is an escapist adventure as much as it is a cautious warning against overuse of technology in the name of defense. The film uses escapism as a means of proving that although

protection is always paradoxically contingent on harmful weaponry and technology, responsible use of this technology and weaponry is vital to the survival of both the characters of the film and American citizens in the real world. Kyle's arrival scene in 1984 is described by him later in the movie as making him feel like he was being born: naked, isolated, a bright light, living in a primal state of fear of what danger now awaits him. In the 1980s, as well as in the flash-forwards to the 2020s, Kyle narrowly evades death many times at the hands of various machines from the future until ultimately, the narrative claims him as its ultimate sacrificial victim— a totem, an example for his post-nuclear family forged by the necessity of time-traveling heroics. Kyle's warnings, originally construed as the ramblings of a mad man, take on new gravitas when final girl Sarah witnesses a barrage of victims being claimed by the titular killer machine— and an ultimate final gravitas when Kyle's body bag is zipped up following Sarah's destruction of the Terminator. Sarah's closing monologue, accompanied by the rumblings of thunder and dark clouds forming overhead foreshadow future deaths, including the apotheosis of Cameron's message that the looming and omnipresent threat of nuclear war has irrevocably altered the prospects of humankind within the context of this films' universe, with the unstated but potent implication that real world annihilation as a result of nuclear rhetoric is an alarming but potentially inevitable possibility that within the context of the film is equal parts threatening and exciting.

The film's final scenes show Sarah Connor becoming a reflection of the force she comes to kill and offers a starkly different Sarah Connor than the one we were introduced to, a now stoic and vigilante force to be reckoned with that will not stop fighting as long as she lives, in the same vain as Clover's traditional final girls: "the Final Girl stands at

last in the light of day with the knife in her hand, she has delivered herself into the adult world" (Clover 49). Of course, Sarah is holding a gun in this final scene as opposed to a knife, but the viewer still recognizes her as phallicized in this scene, since as Clover points out: "The passage from childhood to adulthood entails a shift from feminine to masculine" (Clover 50). As Sarah drives into the unknown future with a weapon, a dog that can detect threats of killer machines, on a dingy road with storm clouds forming around her, she has embraced a rugged masculinity in the process. Although the sequel would complicate a Clover-centric reading of that particular entry (more on that in Chapter Four), *The Terminator* fits nicely in Clover's framework. The necessity of Sarah Connor becoming more masculinized in order to end the threat posed to her and her already fractured future family and to ward off future threats for her and her unborn son, illuminates a fact that Clover does not account for since her main focus is on exploring the gender dynamics in slasher films. The ability to fight effectively in 1980s American culture, as represented in films such as *The Terminator* and *Back to the Future* (albeit in different ways) is usually aligned with masculinity, which is coincidentally also one of the main factors involved with nuclear posturing of the era. Reagan's advocating of as many heterosexual, middle-class nuclear families as possible was predicated on upholding standards of masculinity and simultaneous immersion into an unquestioning consumerist lifestyle. Although *The Terminator* does make it clear that nuclear posturing and unwavering support of American consumerism can have potential severe consequences, it does still end with an implication that the ability to fight effectively is still rendered a feat that requires masculine energy.

Since both action and horror movies are historically targeted toward the young male 18-49 demographic, the denouements of such films tend to feature characters embodying traits considered societally to be desirable. As Clover notes about Sarah, like many final girls of textbook slashers: "Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself" (Clover 40). Sarah's gradual acceptance of Kyle as a protector and eventual lover is in direct correlation with her gradual acceptance of herself as a fighter herself. After Kyle's sacrifice at the hands of the Terminator, Sarah is left alone to fight the final battle with the endoskeleton of the machine. At first under the impression that Reese's sacrifice ended the battle with the machine, its torso is still functional and pursues Sarah. Thinking quickly, she lures the machine into another machine, a hydraulic press and presses a button that crushes it once and for all. Sarah's fear of the Terminator can only be conquered by her destruction of it, and this would have not been possible without Reese's sacrifice. Like most final girls, Sarah had to become a killer in order to not be killed herself, and this sets up her destiny to live a life of vigilance and strength.

Whereas she was earlier watching in horror as people around her were executed and bemoaning the fact that she cannot even balance her checkbook let alone raise a Messianic figure, Connor stands tall psychologically even as she is shown to be laying in a vulnerable position at the moment she barely reaches the button that will terminate her assailant. Although she has never operated a hydraulic press before, and the pursuit of the killer machine prevents her from even getting a chance to fully comprehend what the button she is pressing is actually going to do, Sarah miraculously presses the right button

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and the foe is vanquished. Sarah operates good technology to kill bad technology and becomes representative of America's own nuclear and killer impulses. Essentially, her grit and gradual embrace of her destiny alone are enough to ensure her success and the defeat of the machine trying to end her bloodline, and by extension, the bloodline of the human race. Some things, however, come across as drastically different from the norm in films which feature final girls, most notably the fact that Sarah has premarital sex and lives whereas her sexual partner Kyle sacrifices himself to be killed by the Terminator instead of being dispatched in typical horror movie fashion. This departure from the norm is depicted as a cruel twist of fate, the ultimate culmination of the technological and political developments that have shaped the tragic trajectory of the personal lives of the American people that America's technology was originally designed to protect.

To that end, Kyle Reese is the embodiment of the antithesis of Siegfried Kracauer's exploration of Clear Road films, introduced in his "Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies" essay. As mentioned before, the overall goal of the essay is to enlighten readers about how mass culture works on an unconscious level to affirm the overall values and structure of the ruling class of society. Kracauer lays out a selection of typical plots that pepper popular cinema, all of which in some way enable lower class people to remain hopeful about the possibility of upward mobility without offering a concrete solution for individual success and/or societal change. Films under the Clear Road category of the 1920s present lower class characters who encounter chance scenarios such as rescuing the sister of a manufacturer who is on a horse-and-buggy ride with a horse that has gone rogue and by the end of these types of films, the road is proverbially clear for them to write their own ticket to success (in this scenario, the manufacturer gives the heroic man a job).

Films which conform to The Clear Road category feature characters who achieve success and happiness against all odds resulting in the elevation of his class standing vis-a-vis an unlikely scenario of an encounter with a higher-class citizen (Kracauer 295). The audiences' attention and empathy is laser-focused on a select few characters, seemingly to effectively present a clear-cut narrative but under the surface, these types of films actually are designed to pacify the unhappy masses of society by showing them that under certain conditions, class and social standing can be elevated and improved.

Kyle Reese is the complete opposite: born into a post-apocalyptic hellscape, Kyle was never given the chance to even think about the concept of "class," let alone the ability to transcend it. Kracauer talks about how clear road films save individuals in order to not have to rescue an entire class. To speak specifically to how Cameron's film challenges the tenets of the Clear Road theory, the film presents a love story borne out of tragedy. Sarah falls in love with Kyle in good part due to listening to his stories of fighting, survival and tenacity in the face of Armageddon. In addition, watching him spring into action to protect her against a metallic harbinger of death makes her fall in love with him even more deeply. The film offers a love story deeply contingent on the concept of our imminent nuclear annihilation since Kyle never would have been sent back in the first place if not for the future war, and their love indeed seems fueled by their desire to stay alive by killing the force that threatens their love. As mentioned before, the cautionary tale that is *The Terminator* offers Kyle Reese as a savior ala Kracauer's Clear Road theory in order to assuage real societal concerns. Prototypical examples of the Clear Road theory conform to a certain standard in terms of depicting society: "It is full of pity, this society, and wants to express its emotional excess so as to soothe its conscience-

assuming, of course, that everything can remain the way it is. Out of pity, it extends a hand to one or two of the foundering people and rescues them by pulling them back up to its level, which it really considers to be quite a height. This is how it assures itself moral support, while at the same time maintaining the underling as underling and society as society" (Kracauer 295). At the end of *The Terminator*, Kyle dies trying to protect Sarah, who ultimately has a final showdown with the titular killing machine, because Kyle was only needed for his seed, and to teach Sarah how to kill. The film is her journey, not his. Sarah now has the onus of ensuring the birth and survival of the leader of mankind's resistance against Skynet, and it is clear that the battle has just begun. Sarah now knows that social classes, religious affiliations, geopolitical relations and all the other usual sources of tension and conflict between humans no longer matter. The story of Kyle and Sarah is shown to be an ultimate worst case scenario that can and should be avoided by responsible use of machines and technology. Although the ending of the film dilutes the dire environment the film initially dwells in by presenting future scenes of filth, destruction and death all because of machines, the fact that even part of this films' message is that reckless rhetoric and over-obsession with the military industrial complex has led to this problem in the first place was admirable for a time where most blockbusters ignored the topic completely.

Whereas a year later, *Back to the Future* would comfortably conform to many more of the values of the Reagan Revolution, *The Terminator* does at least merely flirt with anti-establishment messages at a time when most Hollywood films were merely conforming to the ethos of the time. Perhaps an increasing reliance on nuclear technology could spell the end of humanity as we knew it— we programmed our own real life

Terminators, only ours didn't have a metal endoskeleton— they were flesh and bone, locked and loaded, ready to launch bombs at millions of people without even flinching at the fact that the counterattack would decimate millions of people at home as well. Americans were trained to believe that preserving our "way of life" was more important than protecting individual lives. At one point while Kyle and Sarah are resting and getting to know each other, Sarah asks him what the women are like in his time, to which Kyle quickly replies that they are "good soldiers". Sarah seems equal parts heartbroken and flummoxed that his answer is so curt and matter-of-fact, and that the truth of the matter is that in the post-nuclear hellscape the Resistance dwell in, deep and meaningful relationships are hard to come by because everyone is in such intense survival mode. The people of her own era, however, were not much better off, shown to be disillusioned working-class citizens who are constantly bored despite and perhaps because of their immersion into consumer life. The answer the film seems to offer is a life that combines facets of both extreme means of living: Sarah's transformation into a "good soldier" of her own era can be seen as a call to anyone in the audience feeling listless and bored: use consumerist technology in a cautious fashion in order to enrich society without potentially destroying it.

The perpetual war that the Terminator envisions was indeed warming up in Reagan's administration. Mere months before the release of Cameron's film, Reagan made a casual joke about bombing Russia: "My fellow Americans, I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes." While the film was already well into production by the time of this comment, this public faux-pas of Reagan's did nothing but reaffirm the voracious vitriol

the Commander-in-Chief had of what he had previously coined "the Evil Empire". Reagan's Manichean language, that breaks everything down to purely good and evil terms such as the 'evil Empire", speaks to the careless and reckless style of leadership Reagan possessed: as a former actor, he knew how to create ostensibly witty and charming speeches and sound bites better than anyone else. These quips and remarks were the first step toward training America's military in the fight against the "Evil Empire". Numerous bomber programs, paramilitary groups on the ground and other initiatives were launched to aid our defenses. Likely to try to convert non-believers in his cause, President Reagan insisted that a nuclear freeze would merely bring about the illusion of peace whereas amped up programs such as these would bring about peace through strength. There is great irony to be found in these statements, as illusions were of great importance to the President so their dismissal here is jarring, and the conflation he introduced between peace and bombs is staggering.

As an intense allegory for technological warfare in the real world, the looming threat of Kyle's death is at the forefront of *The Terminator*, Kyle throws himself at death. Most of his dialogue with Sarah, especially in their first few encounters where she is still unsure of his sanity, is peppered with language very evocative of the finality of death and the importance of vigilance. Any interactions Kyle has with consumerism in the 1980s are mission-oriented, just as his actions in general are as laser-focused as that of the titular machines': lacing up Nikes to evade police so that he can rendezvous with Sarah as quickly as possible, hot-rodding numerous cars to escape from the clutches of the Terminator, checking in at a motel to recuperate from injuries sustained, and even a quick jaunt to the grocery store to load up on supplies. From the time he was born, Kyle was

trained in the harsh art of survival, to the point that not only could he not be properly versed in the art of consumerist conformity but he could not even appreciate the beauty of nature.

An effective deleted scene that was ultimately left on the cutting room floor due to pacing issues according to director James Cameron featured Kyle Reese breaking down in front of Sarah by a flowing brook: "I don't belong here. I wasn't meant to see this. It's like a dream. This! And you! It's so beautiful. It hurts, Sarah! It hurts so bad. You can't understand. It's gone; all gone. All of it!" Kyle's musings are as profound as they are heartbreaking: the powers-that-be of his world chose to disregard nature, compassion, and reason in favor of aggression, coercion and political maneuvering in the name of peacekeeping. Their careless planning led to nuclear Armageddon that subsequently led to all remaining humans being forced to work together despite pre-existing differences, and deprived Kyle and countless others of the chance for living "normal" lives. Kyle's character exists as a warning to real world citizens that similar fates could await them if the human race keeps going down the path toward inevitable self-destruction. First, the post-nuclear flash-forwards featuring Kyle and other members of the future human Resistance serve as concrete examples of how futile the concept of a nuclear defense system truly is, whether it's operated by humans or subsumed by machines who change the programming of the system. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, these scenes make us realize that all of humanity as a threat with how fast alliances can change in the face of tragedy or other social upheaval.

The chaos the film describes is meant to be ridden by consumers like a wave: the worse the threat, the better the ride. This chaos simultaneously embraces and criticizes

the technological progress that has led American ideology to have to be guarded by nuclear weapons and superior firepower. The film seems to mainly be critical of technology and hyper-consumption, but it also does indicate that in moderation and in the right hands, it can help to clean up the mess caused by reckless technological consumerism. In a book that outlines many of the pitfalls of consumerism and excess, author Kim Humphrey speaks about the concept of anti-consumerism: "What has been consolidated over almost four decades is a resoundingly coherent portrayal of consumption, particularly in the West, as environmentally damaging and as underpinning global economic inequality. Here, consumption is interpreted in the most direct of terms as depletion and waste, carelessness and destruction" (Humphrey 113). Any citizen of Kyle's world, and any American citizen watching *The Terminator* at one of its first screenings, can relate all too well to this sentiment: any escalation of force in either world on the part of Americans is leveled to defend the ideals and consumer products of the era. The devastating consequences of consumerism are multi-faceted: the production process of the products themselves often are environmentally toxic, and the penchant of the military industrial complex to want to defend the American way of life, highly contingent on consumption in a free market, with high-tech weapons, some of which can unleash devastating fallout on not just the "enemy," but potentially the whole natural world itself.

Kyle sacrifices his life so that Sarah can solve the problem at hand in 1984 Los Angeles, but he leaves her armed with the knowledge that this is not the end of the problem at large and she must now completely retool her life to prepare both her family and by extension the world as a whole for the ultimate battle between man and machine. Sarah Connor's life is finally given purpose by Kyle and the Terminator: she goes from a

desensitized and bored waitress to a gun-toting, protective mother that in many ways serves as the ultimate embodiment of Reaganite values. Although more critical than most blockbusters of the era of Reagan's policies, the politics of the film are a tad murky especially when considering how the solution to the problem caused by dangerous Reaganite rhetoric is paradoxically solved by transforming the heroine into a Reaganite warrior focused on protecting her family through becoming a driven soldier. Still, Cameron makes great pains to spell out to viewers that Terminators are emotionless, mission-driven entities that are simply carrying out the tasks that humans programmed them for in the first place— the only difference became that the machines decided in a microsecond that humankind as a whole was an unpredictable threat that needed to be eradicated. Cameron's script is very matter of fact, and wasn't written to convey to the general public that all machines are bad and humanity is sacred— but rather quite the opposite. Skynet's decisions are all pragmatic and sensible from their standpoint: humanity's obsession with destruction, technology and war came to a head and as a result of humanity's hubris thinking that it was a good idea to combine all of those factors into one perfect technological defense weapon, the whole world now has to suffer. Now that Pandora's box has been proverbially opened, it is crucial for human beings to deepen and develop their relationship with technology in order to realize the potential promise it can have of improving lives while simultaneously being aware that it can destroy as much as it can create.

James Cameron's *The Terminator* showcases a fictional reality where reckless use of technology has led to societal obliteration but it also features characters who operate technology responsibly in order to save humanity. As horrific as many scenes are

throughout the film, they are also presented as exciting, as if they are necessary in order to establishment a more stable reality for humankind. Although it is admirable that the parable the film offers indicts the reckless geopolitical nuclear ambitions of the Reaganite administration, the resolution of the film indicates that responsible use of consumerism and technology can be beneficial to society. Ironically, real life would slightly imitate art as Reagan would eventually tone down his nuclear ambitions and rhetoric and seemingly had a sudden change of heart regarding the "Evil Empire". Throughout his second term, the President held numerous conversations with Gorbachev which eventually led to the signing of arms control treaties. It seems fairly likely that movements such as the Nuclear Freeze movement had a significant impact on the path America went down on the nuclear war front. Still, Reagan's mantra of "Trust, but verify" indicated that vigilance and preparation in terms of both physical and psychological defense would remain crucial, and the consequences of the death drive are never too far behind. Since no film is released in a vacuum, it should be inferred that *The Terminator* was released as a concrete representation of what a society could come to if issues of defense are not addressed in a levelheaded manner. At the same time, it offered a fascinating look into humans' deeply problematic relationship with the concept of war in general, and also showcased characters whose lives were so contingent on war that the concept of peace could be equally as terrifying to them as the concept of total annihilation. The relationship between Kyle and Sarah, ruptured as quickly as it is formed, as well as the unfolding dynamics between them in terms of class, gender roles and their emotional journey from dissonance to short-lived crystal clear connection is the apotheosis of the

consequences of living in a tragic and unstable world. Still, hope looms on the horizon if technology is used appropriately, and the allure of the death drive is omnipresent.

CHAPTER TWO:

Reaganite Commodification and Ideals of the Family in *Back to the Future*

In chapter one, I focused on representations of the military face of Reagan's politics in *The Terminator*, and in this chapter, I turn to the fetishization of the American family in the 1985 comedy, *Back to the Future*, directed by Robert Zemeckis. The relationship politics of the film mirrors the overall political climate engendered by Reagan: chaos results when men abdicate their proper roles as providers and consumers. As the plot unfolds, American consumers get to laugh at the consequences of such ineffectiveness but what actually is being celebrated is the consumerist nuclear family which places more focus on societal roles than individuality, and the sexual confusion and frustration that many of the characters experience is symptomatic of this. Far from being merely charming pop-cultural wallpaper in this film, the corporate product placements in *Back to the Future* actually constitute important elements of the plot, connecting the nuclear family's success to name brand marketing such as Calvin Klein and Diet Pepsi.

Back to the Future is an escapist fantasy that features an unfulfilled teenager gaining access to a time machine from an eccentric inventor friend and inadvertently sending himself back to the 1950s when one of Doc Brown's experiments goes awry. We are first introduced to Marty's dysfunctional family who has dinner together: his mother Lorraine is a depressed alcoholic, his father is a nonconfrontational and barely successful provider, and his siblings are social outcasts as well. Later that night, Marty meets up with Doctor Brown to test out his new time machine he has made out of a DeLorean car. A series of events transpires where Marty has to commandeer the vehicle and

accidentally transports himself back to 1955. After inadvertently bumping into his parents, Doc fears he has altered the course of history and Marty must ensure his parents fall in love before Doc can help Marty get back to 1985. Although initially Marty is a stranger in a strange time, he gradually uses the opportunity to flex his pop cultural knowledge in order to convince his father to become a better self-confident consumer with muscles who in standing up for himself and actively contributing to consumer culture will propel his family to a higher socioeconomic category.

The subtle politics as presented through the functioning of the town of Hill Valley and its inhabitants is a potent example of a modern-day mass ornament as defined by Frankfurt School theorist Siegfried Kracauer in the 1920s. Kracauer was perturbed by a new form of aesthetic entertainment that was becoming a new art form in which hordes of people would arrange themselves in geometric formations in a synchronized fashion. He would eventually liken these formations to that of Nazi troops in their rallies. Kracauer's *The Mass Ornament* discusses dance troupes such as the Tiller girls as a means of proving his thesis that such precise geometric configurations of human beings speaks to the problems inherent in society. A society can interpret geometric configurations as symptomatic of itself and the culture that said society inspires. In lieu of reading objects of art for intended meanings, analyzing such cultural phenomena as the Tiller girls in terms of how they reflect sociohistorical conditions is more helpful. Popular art of any era unconsciously speaks to the issues of the day it is released in since no work of art can exist in a vacuum. Kracauer lambastes the film industry of the time in which he wrote, stating that the industry needs to "liberate representation from all alien elements and to aim radically at a diversion that exposes the decline instead of disguising it"

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(Kracauer 317). Although Kracauer wrote this piece in the 1920s, it is just as applicable to the culture of the 1980s: films like *Back to the Future* which reflected the values the Reagan administration endorsed such as family values and consumerism may have not have even been made with the intent of reflecting them but nonetheless this movie did and showcased the inextricable link between family values, sexual confusion and consumerism. The films' version of mass ornaments are found in its fetishization of consumption, offering Jeeps, ornate houses and the like as the ultimate symbol of success and wealth.

Back to the Future is essentially a blueprint for Reaganite ideology— it is so attuned with Reaganite policies and sensibilities that Ronald Reagan himself loved the film and had it screened at the White House quite often. It might be a step too far to call the film propaganda, but its structure, tone and sentiments certainly struck a chord with the dominant political party of the time. Whereas many critics of Reagan rightfully exposed his administrations' blatant ignorance on important social issues and excessive exhortation of greed and consumerism, the first *Back to the Future* film features little to no pushback on any lapses in Reaganite logic/compassion. Because of this, relationships have to be surface level and defined mainly in terms of connection visa-vie harmless, seemingly apolitical pop culture and consumer products. This hyper focus on consumption acted as the dominant diversion of the 1980s, and the framing and the framework of this movie makes this abundantly clear. Marty's arrival scene in 1955 features classic songs like "Mr. Sandman" playing in the Town Square, a billboard for the latest Ronald Reagan movie, and more pop culture and consumerist references than can be listed. The framing of the movie immediately glorifies the 1950s as a haven of

consumer delight, and gradually as the film goes on, the desire for Marty to instill this spirit in his 1980s timeline will flourish. The emphasis the film places on proper immersion into pop culture as a means to better one's self and perhaps even inspire the creation and flourishing of a nuclear family speaks to Kracauer's argument about mass ornaments. Taking the time to analyze the obsession of popular media in the 1980s to enforce such ideals is crucial, as this obsession is indicative of just how perilous conformity to dominant sociopolitical norms can be.

Before delving further into the specific ways the film engages with these norms, it is prudent to discuss cultural history about Reaganite family policy and rhetoric. In a book which showcases snippets from several of Reagan's most famous speeches and addresses in addition to analyzing them under the lens of the former President's persuasive rhetorical powers, Paul D. Erickson notes how Reagan's "at times confused but nevertheless potent set of convictions and visions translates history into mythology and life into a dream" (Erickson 3). Indeed, Reagan would often incorporate his own military career, film roles and anecdotes he had extrapolated from other people into his speeches in order to prove his points to the nation and the world at large. He would focus his attention on always presenting American conservative "characters" of his stories as the heroes and liberal Americans and forces from other countries as the antagonists of his stories. He would conflate facets from the military, film and political realms of his life in order to further cement his ideals, with the underlying message being that the strength of America was contingent on spiritual and moral character. Reagan also turned to his own family as an ideal example of how family can and should shape peoples' moral character and desire to contribute to society in the name of God and country. Reagan's desire to

lead by example in addition to the allegories and parables he would invoke regarding idyllic familial love and life was presented in such a charming way (due to his background as an actor) that many did not realize just how dangerous and exclusive his rhetoric was. Even when talking about soldiers lost in Vietnam, Reagan imagined fallen soldiers from that war as coming from ideal backgrounds in order to emphasize how good soldiers are strong, God-fearing patriots who believe in hard work in the name of capitalism. In Reagan's view, the ultimate tragedy of the Vietnam War was that too many Americans fitting this mold were betrayed and let down by ineffectual leadership: "Soldiers of all ages died in Vietnam, but Reagan made his soldier specifically a young man, the good son who carried the lessons of his family and faith abroad as the Iowa boys did to a foreign land" (Erickson 55). When a soldier from Vietnam became interred at Arlington in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Reagan said: "We may not know of this man's life, but we know of his character. We may not know his name, but we know his courage. He is the heart, the spirit, the soul of America" (Reagan, quoted by Erickson, 57). Reagan made it clear that the individual person did not matter as much as what his sacrifice represented: devotion to the point of death in the name of America. Reagan's dogged and steadfast campaign against Communism served as the lynchpin for his Presidency, and this campaign further stressed the importance of defense buildup and strong military presence in order to prevent future Vietnam War-style mishaps. Reagan encouraged Americans to view defense against Communist forces as necessary for the smooth functioning of American democracy, as cultural historian Stuart Kallen notes: "Reagan advocated the construction of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), popularly known as Star Wars, as a high-tech antimissile system designed to protect the United

States from nuclear attack. He also approved development of the super elusive stealth bomber. In 1981, to achieve the goal of mounting a credible threat to the Soviet Union, the Reagan administration budgeted $108.3 billion for defense over the next six years" (Kallen 23). True American strength had to be visibly seen and viscerally felt in order to be effective, and this extended to the American family as well which in Reagan's view served as the ultimate reason for all of this defense. He viewed strong families as being formed by traditional heterosexual couples who accepted any children God wanted to provide them with (he was firmly against abortion), and encouraged them to abstain from marijuana, excessive drinking and other vices. Although he was not religious himself, his values adhered very closely to Christian values since he viewed vices as distractions from hard work and ability to firmly immerse one's self into consumer life. Corporations thrived in the 1980s since Reagan viewed a healthy economy and citizens' acceptance and desire to contribute to it as another vital deterrent to Communism: "Besides industrial corporations, the Reagan administration eased restrictions on the stock market and other financial institutions. Antitrust laws- statutes designed to prevent concentration of economic power in a few very powerful firms- were not enforced rigorously in the 1980s" (Kallen 50). It was greatly encouraged for American citizens to use their hard-earned money to shop American-made products at local malls and mom-and-pop stores alike. Reagan felt that supporting American products and inventions inspired people to strive for upward mobility themselves, even as his restrictive policies favoring corporations and the upper classes of society shut out countless Americans from even having a fighting chance to achieve this mobility.

Ultimately, *Back to the Future* is a perfect microcosm of the idealized American family of the Reagan Era that permeated the social atmosphere of the time. A consistent goal of the franchise is to ensure the creation and maintenance of the nuclear family. In an essay describing the troubling gender politics of the series, Katherine Farrimond states that: "The dormant state of premarital womanhood is always replaced by a nostalgic image of marital life and the nuclear family, as Lorraine, Jennifer and Clara are all represented as moving inevitably towards marriage in the future" (Farrimond 165). What is of utmost importance in every timeline represented in the series is the survival and thriving of the McFly lineage. Most other characters that are given any significant amount of screentime are merely on screen to either pose threats to this lineage or to aid the McFly family. Although the film chooses to directly avoid talking about Russian/US relations, the main plot points relating to consumerism are political in and of themselves, as one of the main tools that Reagan suggested using to combat Communism was a healthy investment in American made products and media. In turn, such media would often depict wholesome families which consisted of a hard-working father figure, doting and patient wife and consumer-conscious children seeking to make their lives better and more fun through engagement with capitalism. The McFly family unit is a microcosm of the ideal American family in general, and audiences were meant to relate to as many elements of the McFly family dynamic as possible so that the overall message of consumerism being the fuel that runs American families and homes could be processed.

As such, appearances and tangible, concrete totems of consumerist life are the lifeblood of Hill Valley. The sanitized, picture-perfect, and polished 1950s Town Square tonally matches the picture-perfect, all-American Baines household where Lorraine is

growing up. Likewise, thirty years later in the films' timeline, when George's life has been turned upside down by bullies and indecisiveness, Hill Valley's aesthetic complements this, the town now replete with porn theaters, grimy loan shark offices and bums on park benches. Although this type of aesthetic was also familiar to some audiences watching in 1985, the people who created and marketed this film wanted viewers to suspend disbelief and watch in horror as Marty raced against the clock to secure a present and future for himself which would run counter to the prevailing reality of the time in which the film was released. Undoubtedly one of many classic wish-fulfillment narratives of the time period, the film presents nostalgic images of the past and a fairly glamorized 1985 which glosses over hard realities of life in a similar way that Reagan's administration did. According to film lecturer Sorcha Ni Fhlainn, who compiled a book of critical essays on the franchise, the film series "instilled a desire to return to a mythical past, to reinvigorate narratives which reassert and reify the American Dream, and were symptomatic of a decade that wished to forget the realities of the 1980s: unemployment, class inequality, crime, increased drug use, AIDS, and rising levels of poverty" (Fhlainn 5). The film cleverly peppers in its time travel and science-fiction elements quite effectively and quite often, which serves a dual purpose of furthering the narrative as well as subtly trying to instill in viewers that the kind of upward mobility the McFly family is capable of is hard to come by short of building a time machine.

The transformation of the McFly family from lower middle-class to upper middle-class is coded as the most important element of Marty and Doc's success at the end of the film. The nicer house, the brand-new Jeep, and the higher echelon jobs of George and his other son Dave are the clearest markers of success. It is worth noting that initially,

Marty's main drive is to push his parents together so that he isn't erased from existence, but, as time goes on, he also plants seeds in his parents' heads to set their sights higher than just getting by. The most concrete example of this comes when Marty encourages his dad to pursue his love of science-fiction writing, which is partially what enables the long-term success of the family. George's love of science-fiction spurs his imagination and leads him to start writing his own stories within the genre. It becomes clear to Marty that the only way to convince George to ask Lorraine out is to don his radiation suit and pretend to be "Darth Vader" from "Planet Vulcan". This ends up serving a dual purpose: it gives George the necessary motivation to ask Lorraine to the dance as well as inspiring him to keep writing. Essentially, the McFly's family's proper consumption of pop culture enables them to achieve their own success both at work and at home. Ultimately, appearances and status are what mattered both to the characters in the film, and the Commander-in-Chief of the country in which the film was released.

Furthermore, the unwritten assumption emerges that no one in any timeline depicted in the series can be counted as successful unless they are contributing to their respective economy, as Rebecca Janicker observes in a book detailing how scientists in popular culture encourage public engagement with scientific themes in a significant way: "*Back to the Future* finds Marty rooting himself within the world of cultural production and Brown creating a technology that exceeds the limits of a globalized economy, allowing them to excel in a world they have shaped to a point no longer confined by nationalism, but still entrenched in American enterprise" (Janicker 86). What's critical to note here is that Marty achieves most of this through a feat the real world does not have access to: time travel. Still, audiences are expected to root for Marty and aspire to his

level of success despite the inability they have to do so since they do not have the benefit of hindsight and foresight in the same way the fictional protagonist does. Nevertheless, audiences are shown that the inhabitants of 1985 Hill Valley that work hard by day, and go out by night to enjoy the perks of a flourishing community of stores, restaurants and movie theaters by night are to be respected and even imitated.

While the dogged focus of the characters in *The Terminator* is to reproduce soldiers to survive against a deadly threat, here it is on the forging and upkeep of nuclear relationships to ensure existence in a material world. Existence is mainly important within the milieu of the film because it gives characters the chance to consume and contribute to the culture of consumption that pervades American life. Whereas Cameron's film cleverly and subtly meditates amidst its action set pieces about how dangerous Pandora's Box can be once opened, *Back to the Future* treats nuclear anxiety as a joke at worst and a plot enhancer at best. Released at a time when tensions of nuclear war were still high but a feeling of largely unwarranted pride of American consumer innovation was in the air, *Back to the Future* swerves around heavy political talk in favor of a few overtly political jokes scattered throughout, and even those are tame. There are virtually no direct references to Russia in the film, but rather a couple subtle ones that a casual viewer might not even pick up on. The most glaring one is when the Libyan terrorists (played by non-Libyan actors, of course) are attempting to gun down Marty after killing Doc for selling them pinball machine parts instead of the bomb they requested. As they are about to pull the trigger on Marty, the gun jams prompting the gunman to curse the gun under his breath: "Damn Soviet gun!" This is the only kind of politics the franchise believes in spouting: under someone's breath, in the background of

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a shot or a visual gag that most viewers will never even notice. This is the kind of politics that most blockbuster movies abide by, which is generally a smart and strategic move which enables the production to generate lots of revenue since a wide swath of the public will flock to the theaters. Nevertheless, it is intriguing that this line made it into the script to begin with, and this joke that even terrorists in cahoots with each other cannot trust each other emphasizes the point that the script seeks to get across that only those who embrace capitalism can and should be spared from harm. If Doctor Brown had never consorted with the Libyans to begin with, Marty's life would not be in danger in the first place. Simultaneously, however, Doc's ability to innovate would have been hindered and Marty would be unable to fix his family through time travel, so the ends is essentially supposed to justify the means in this case.

A motto originally shared between Marty and Doc even before they had their time travel adventures together that became co-opted by the McFly family was "If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything". On the surface, this is an inspirational quote that serves to motivate people to achieve their dreams and goals. Upon closer examination, though, there is a lot to unpack here: Marty and George are supposed to stand in for average American citizens, but they both inherently possess privileged backgrounds such as being from financially stable families that own real estate in a safe, clean and economically thriving neighborhood. Even furthermore, as previously discussed, Marty is able to achieve a great part of his mission due to the fact that he has the foresight of future events due to the plot device of time travel. Even George unknowingly benefits from this foresight as Marty's Darth Vader prank gives him the impetus he needs to kickstart his science-fiction career. In a movie that already starts off

dismissive of anyone not in the middle class, the potential to alienate even the people of

that category was very much there. The over-the-top comedic antics of the inhabitants of

Hill Valley as well as the effortless banter between the characters prevented such

dismissal from happening and the film went on to both dominate the box office and home

video for years to come. Even today, in the midst of the streaming age, where an endless

library of films and television shows are at peoples' fingertips, the series still endures and

manages to find new fans. The movie is oftentimes described as depicting timeless

themes, such as standing up to a bully and the beginning of a love story. Even the film's

flirtation with incest is comedy. Ultimately, though, what the first film does is allow

people to unconsciously realize that their consumer instincts are perhaps the only defense

they have left against giving into sublimated incestuous urges and also their potential

ticket to relevance in a landscape of forgotten and dashed dreams.

The fetishization of consumerism in this film ultimately helps to repress the

Freudian dynamics on display throughout. Although many analyses of the film series

discusses these dynamics, most do not relate them to the overall consumer dynamics of

the film. It is only when all of the consumers of the film are in perfect harmony that the

sexual tension within the family dissipates and even disappears. Lorraine, for example,

seems to have no recollection of Marty at all, let alone the fact that she tried to pursue

him romantically in 1955. To account for this oddity, it is prudent to first address Freud's

theory on the Oedipus complex. Although it was elaborated on throughout his career,

Sigmund Freud first coined the term Oedipus complex in his 1899 *The Interpretation of*

Dreams: "It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our

mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams

convince us that this is so" (Freud 296). Furthermore, he posits that "We live in ignorance of the wishes that offend morality, wishes which nature has forced upon us, and after the revelation of which we want to avert every glance from the scenes of our childhood" (Freud 224). The time-travelling DeLorean is the structural deus-ex-machina of the franchise, and problematizes some of what Freud discusses, since he talks about interfamilial relationships on a linear timeline but the basic dynamics apply to the film. In fact, the time travel element of the film is the only reason for any of the consumer and sexual confusion that takes place throughout the story. The Catch-22 becomes that Marty, an ideal consumer of his own time period, is shown to be the only character capable of having George capitalize on his talents as a writer, and his ability to stand up for himself as a person and as a potential lover. The script implies that it is George's flaws that prompt Lorraine's frustration and as a result, Marty becomes stuck in the middle and must bridge the gap between Lorraine's desires (all of which seem to be centered around starting a prototypical nuclear family) and George's dysfunction.

A kind of reverse Freudian relationship exists between Marty and Lorraine—whereas Freud's theory states that sons have a desire to sleep with their mother, one of the main conflicts of the movie takes shape when Lorraine falls madly in love with her son, unaware of the fact that he is related to her. Complicating things further, and presenting a typical example of the Freudian relationship, Marty also has brief moments of repressed lust for Lorraine. Such scenes are played for laughs, but solely because he denies his urges and remains steadfast in his quest to ensure his own existence and to preserve the fabric of the space-time continuum. Two notable examples of this are when he awakens without his pants on in his mom's childhood bedroom and has to look away

from her in order to prevent himself from giving into his desire for young Lorraine, as well as the moment when he and Lorraine "park" at the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance and Lorraine starts to aggressively make a move. Notably, in the first scene, Lorraine mistakenly labels Marty as "Calvin Klein," figuring that he is rich enough to have his underwear specially embroidered with his name on them. Lorraine is literally expressing desire for a "brand" --- product placement of the best kind. Within the context of the film, this misrecognition enables Marty to float around 1955 Hill Valley with a pseudonym that no one will be able to identify as fake due to the fact that Calvin Klein wasn't an established brand yet. The brand wouldn't rise to prominence until 1982, right around the time the Reagan Revolution was in full swing. There is more significance to this misrecognition than is noted narratively, however: a great majority of Marty's character development in the franchise, especially in the first film, hinges on his status as an ideal Reagan-era consumer. Thus, for Lorraine to call him "Calvin Klein" is not too far-fetched— Marty McFly is embodied by many of the commercial products the film associates with him: Calvin Klein, Huey Lewis, Diet Pepsi, Gibson and Adidas rolled into one. In Hill Valley, a microcosm of an ideal Reaganite hometown, products make the man more than anything else. This mastery over pop culture is part of what is necessary to bridge the aforementioned gap between his parents. Thus, the intergenerational consumerist back-and-forth helps promote the capitalist production process and representative of the tenets of Kracauer's mass ornament theory. In a book analyzing the writings of Siegfried Kracauer, Professor of Film Gertrude Koch notes how the mass ornament is: "the cause and creator of the organized mass, but also the ornament is the "fetish that represents an internalized leader, the 'monstrous figure' is the 'rationale' the

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masses can 'invoke'" (Koch 34). Consumerist transactions are the fuel that keeps Hill

Valley running, and by extension all of America, and it's the duty of each family to

properly ingratiate themselves into this fold. Furthermore, this intergenerational

consumerism is ultimately what keeps incestuous urges and, even more frighteningly,

actions at bay.

The incestuous longings of Lorraine are only quenched by Marty's intervention in

his father's purposeless and conflict-averse life. The modeling of real manhood that

Marty does for George sets the stage for the character to weather the sociopolitical and

socioeconomic storms to come in the decades that bridge the two main eras depicted in

the film. Interestingly, when Marty returns to 1985 and discovers that his father has truly

taken all of Marty's advice to heart, the town square is still somewhat decrepit and run

down compared to its 1950s glory. The underlying implication is that despite Reagan's

best efforts to "clean up" the country the way Goldie Wilson promises to do for Hill

Valley, ultimately only individual family efforts to boost and support the economy can

ever make it possible for the community as a whole to thrive. This is a convenient way of

choosing to put the blame on American families for the epidemics of poverty and class

warfare that pervaded 1980s America— the ethos of the time sought to instill within

citizens that the government would not be responsible for socioeconomic issues that

should be solved through individual "hard work" and an adherence to the dominant

norms of the time. The movie certainly does ingratiate itself with the success/work ethic

Reagan espoused throughout his presidency. As Chris Jordan notes, series star Michael J.

Fox also aligned his overall image with this ethic: his movies "invited viewers to indulge

in fantasies of suburban utopia conceptualized in terms of advertising-inspired lifestyle

trends" (Jordan 50). An example in the film which reflected this was when Marty's band

in the original 1985 timeline auditions in front of a character played by Huey Lewis to an

amped up, hard rock rendition of "The Power of Love," which itself was the theme song

for the movie and would go on to dominate the Billboard charts and remains to this day a

popular anthem for fans of the franchise and a mainstay on classic rock channels. Within

the context of the film, the audition is important as it makes us root for Marty's dream. It

is coded as a good goal to long for, but not a necessity for everyone because the world

needs ordinary people to consume the media that superstars pump out and a symbiotic

relationship exists between the creators and the fans.

Marty starts to fade away from existence during the scene directly after Biff

finally gets knocked out by George. The movie makes it abundantly clear that just

standing up to his bully is not going to keep Marty's family from being threatened: once

George finally gets up the nerve to kiss Lorraine, that is when the film's background

music crescendos, Marty stops disappearing and is able to keep playing with Chuck

Berry's cousin at the dance. In addition to being the moment that formally puts the

Oedipal threat to rest, it also seems important that this fading begins to occur while Marty

is jamming out with the family of a rock legend. Since Marty aspires to be the 1980s

equivalent of Chuck Berry, the fading's relevance becomes more than just the threat of

erasure from existence: it transforms into the threat of irrelevance. Marty's singular focus

of ensuring his own existence is part of what allows us to laugh at the scenes that deal

with unwitting incestuous urges: "His return to the past enables him to resolve an oedipal

crisis and to reshape his life and the lives of his parents for the better. He acts out the

'family romance' to which Freud referred: the desire to replace unsatisfactory parents

with ideal ones" (Gordon 34). A link emerges between incest and consumerism: in order to prevent any urges he may have to give into his young, attractive, all-American poster child for an ideal supportive wife, he takes his original goal one step further and starts peppering in hints for his parents about how to make his 1980s life more bearable. Once he gets back to the future, he can properly give into his urges with his girlfriend Jennifer now that he has awakened a sexually liberated Lorraine. Of course, the very fact that Marty is the impetus for her sexual awakening is a nightmare of its own, so distractions emerge for both Marty and Lorraine in order to avoid thinking about the implications: Marty's got a new Jeep and Lorraine just got back from the country club with the now confident, masculine and sexualized George. Although George and Marty always danced around the uncomfortable topic of explicit sexual desire (a particularly interesting moment played for laughs occurs as George is holding his mother's bra on laundry day at the 1950s McFly residence), Marty's awakening of George's creative mind and swagger directly lead to a sexual awakening of his own. Marty's parents used to barely look at each other, with George spending most of his day watching reruns of 1950s television shows (intimating an unconscious desire of his to fix the past) and Lorraine resorting to alcohol to try to fill her inner void. Now, thanks to their son's intervention, they are clearly sexually active adults actively contributing to and benefiting from the dominant culture of consumerism. The link between consumerism and sexual freedom that emerges is made possible through the avoided incest in the 1950s timeline.

Reagan's urging for cookie-cutter, practically factory-assembled family units doubtless had the potential for unintended consequences, and *Back to the Future* explores this and plays it for laughs in the same way it plays homelessness and racism for laughs

without even pausing to reflect on the actual gravitas of these issues. The convenience of the conveyance of time travel simply cancels out any necessity to think critically about these issues. Reagan's ideology trained young children to model their future relationships on that of their parents right down to engraining in them that they should buy houses in well-to-do communities and fill those houses with all the latest American-made products. The only way for American products to be consumed is to have families to consume them, and this unspoken but implied concept of the "human assembly line" was the most efficient way of bringing this to fruition.

Returning to the earlier assertion that Marty's fading at the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance is more about fading out of relevance than existence, the series does seem to stress heavily the importance of chasing lofty career goals. Marty doesn't seem to think that he will amount to anything if he doesn't become a rock star, and the happy ending of the first film seems to cement this: although George's success serves as a motivation for Marty, it can ultimately backfire.

Reagan favored the upper class with all of his policies and actions, but his effervescent charm as an actor somehow duped many lower middle-class families into thinking they could transcend this status in a very similar way to how the McFly family climbs the socioeconomic ladder of Hill Valley. Political scientist Michael Rogin notes how Reagan's background as an actor allowed him to effortlessly conflate reality with the movies, which served his political career quite well. Poetically, Reagan was slated to open up the 1981 Academy Awards from the White House with the theme "film is forever," but his attempted assassin John Hinckley had other plans. Although the Awards ceremony was postponed one night due to the assassination attempt, his address was pre-

taped so through the power of the moving image, Reagan was still able to convey his message to those watching the Awards show. Although he was actually laying in a hospital bed the night of the Awards, he appeared healthy, strong and in command as his address was filmed in the Oval Office, which allowed the message to take on new meaning: it made the President seem invincible and his message seemed that much more important due to the fact that "film is forever". According to Rogin, "Reagan was President because of film, hospitalized because of film, and present as an undamaged image because of film. The shooting climaxed film's ingestion of reality" (Rogin 4). The concept of filmic images is as important to Reagan's trajectory from actor to President and his legacy in general as it is to film itself, and film even influenced the way the President led. He drew on his own filmic background to get elected and would reflect on it often throughout his Presidency, in addition to invoking other films in order to prove his points. One notable example occurred before he publicly addressed the nation on June 30, 1985 to discuss the release of American hostages from TWA flight 847 when he quipped before the broadcast started that *Rambo* gave him some ideas about how to deal with future hostage scenarios. Another quite apropos scenario occurred during his 1986 State of the Union address where he actually referenced *Back to the Future* by quoting the end scene: "Where we're going, we don't need roads". Reagan's constant references to pop culture, particularly films, speaks to the inextricable link between real politics and reel politics, a link which as Rogin notes got Reagan elected in the first place.

The fact that Reagan loved *Back to the Future* so much that he had it screened often at the White House and referenced it in speeches is proof that the concept of performativity was more important to Reagan than substantive action that would actually

service the majority of Americans. Anytime the film references Reagan, it is somehow in reference to his status as an actor, because he is only referenced during the glorified 1950s section of the film when he was only an actor. Marty's reveal to Doc Brown that 1985's President was former actor Ronald Reagan astonished Doc initially (as it did many Americans), but Doc soon sees why Reagan was elected when Marty plays a video for Doc on a JVC camcorder, a representation of future consumerist technology to his inventor friend: "No wonder your President's an actor, he has to look good on television". Once again, it is the concept of images that is shown to be of paramount importance to success and legacy. This trickles down from the concept of Presidents down to average Joe's (and Marty's) and the film makes it clear that image is vital to one's ability to be an effective American citizen who is able to stand up for themselves and contribute to the economy. Just as Reagan's early success as an actor is shown on a marquee in 1955 Hill Valley, George's success which enables the elevation of his family to upper middle-class status is shown via images such as a highly choreographed punch which stops a bully from assaulting his future wife and the image of his novel at the end of the film which indicates his success as an author. All of his success is thanks to Marty's encouragement who already knows how to be a good consumer: it is Marty's knowledge of Darth Vader and the like that enables George's career, and the fact that most of the successes depicted in the film rely on the appropriation or outright plagiarizing of other people speaks volumes to the troubling morals of Reagan's administration. Not only do images mean more than concrete thought, but proper attribution doesn't even matter as long as these images correlate with Reaganite ideology. It is no wonder that Reagan championed this movie: it was about the good old days when

he was an actor: now he acts in a different capacity, pretending that reel politics can solve real problems- to the point that it's unclear whether or not he actually bought this himself. In actuality, it doesn't matter whether or not he did, because the constant slippage he engaged in between actuality reality and filmic reality threatened the livelihoods of many lower-class and marginalized Americans as well as foreign citizens who were at the mercy of his nuclear whims.

While *Back to the Future* really was well made, the powers-that-be that greenlit and made the film clearly thought it was a wise idea to align the film's script with the ethos of this era as tightly as possible. Reagan needed to keep the lower middle class in his pocket in order to ensure his tenure, and the best way to do so was to pander to them and convince them that success was attainable for everyone as long as they worked hard and consumed harder. The feelings Zemeckis' film sought to instill in the audience echoed what films of days past tried to do as well: "The middle class and the impoverished masses in general demand heart, which costs nothing. When people lack all else, feeling is everything" (Kracauer 96). More times than not, feelings and attitudes oftentimes dictated citizens' perceived realities more than anything else since they didn't have any actual measured socioeconomic success to their name yet. The upbeat surface of the first film betrays the latent undertones that actually seep in unconsciously to viewers', and by extension, voters' brains: if you are not a socially active, financially lucrative member of society, you are worthless and you're breaking the chain of productive consumption that your ancestors have "worked so hard" to establish and maintain. Unseen characters like Joey, Lorraine's imprisoned brother, and seen ones like Red the Bum, exist to provide contrast to the ultimately successful characters such as Marty and

George. Characters such as those exist to show that, indeed, a fate exists worse than being

erased from existence: irrelevance amidst a sea of innovative creators and consumers.

CHAPTER THREE:

***Die Hard* and Troubles for the American Economy and Manhood**

In this chapter, an examination of the 1988 film *Die Hard*, I show that the film's streetwise New York cop hero probably best illustrates the thesis of Susan Jeffords' *Hard Bodies*: Although I argue that the film mildly questions the shortcoming of its hero's raw masculinity more than Jeffords might admit, in the end the film leaves us with a bare-chested macho hero who saves the day. Trying to save his marriage at the same time he foils an international bank heist ring over one long Christmas holiday night, the main character plays both a tough American (as if he were in a western) doing battle with foreigners, whether they be Japanese businessmen (who have built the skyscraper he is trying to defend), or the German bank robbers who are trying to steal their money. Despite its remarkable and arresting action sequences, the film itself is a fairly conventional patriotic vehicle celebrating American grit and innovation with its most difficult cultural work finessing how this cowboy-hero has to re-tool his old behavior to make room for the business wife of the Reagan era and new world economic powerhouses, such as the Japanese had become in the 1980s. Up until this point, the heroes were clichéd, practically invincible Adonises who were shown to be stoic and emotionless such as Rambo and Dirty Harry. This film introduces a reluctant protagonist, streetwise New York City cop John McClane, who does still adhere to some of the tenets of a traditional American action movie hero but is also starkly different as well especially in terms of his emotional vulnerability. The villain, stylish but maniacal Hans Gruber, also, feels new: a classy thief who wears fancy suits and only pretends to care about major social causes but at the end of the day only cares about money. Most terrorists

depicted in blockbuster films up until this point, especially filmic villains hailing from Germany, Russia, or the Middle East, had revolutionary agendas in mind—Gruber merely feigns it in order to secure his bearer bonds. Delving into complex themes for an action film such as the devolution of a marriage as a result of archaic gender roles and the blurred lines of capitalism and terrorism, director John McTiernan's *Die Hard* is a prime example of how action movies can double as entertainment and commentary on the state of affairs of the society it is released in. The film is a visual representation of a fundamental flaw that existed in 1980s American society, and still even persists today: that there is such a hyperfocus on the formation and maintenance of masculinity as a means of protecting nuclear families that there is little time to actually form meaningful relationships and connections with loved ones. Although the film flirts with McLane's slow dawning awareness that he might have to change his behavior, it finally retreats from much of a cultural critique of America's family values and consumerism as he slowly disrobes to a primitive masculinity by the end, and also presides over the explosion of the towering symbol of the Japanese economy at the end: McLane pretends to be learning new tricks and new sensitivities about a changing world, but blowing things up all things foreign (much like *The Terminator*) is where this movie ends.

Die Hard is a simultaneous meditation on the rising Japanese economy and the waning and renegotiation of typical norms of masculinity. New York City cop John McClane is visiting his estranged wife Holly at her corporate Christmas party, and later plans on seeing his children who Holly has been maintaining custody of. After a brief argument between the two about Holly seeming to prefer her career over her marriage, the building is seized by former terrorist Hans Gruber and his crew. At first appearing to

be traditional terrorists, it is eventually revealed that they are merely after the 640 million

dollars in bearer bonds that the building houses. Hans kills an executive for the Japanese

conglomerate Holly is employed by after he refuses to give the code to the vaults, and a

member of Hans' crew gets to work trying to hack into the vault. McClane springs into

action, killing one of the terrorists, stealing his weapon and radio and trying to get into

contact with emergency personnel. Out of the many law enforcement representatives that

are dispatched to the scene, only one is truly helpful to John, Officer Powell, but he

cannot do much but offer moral support to John as higher-ups keep getting in the way and

inadvertently making it easier for the terrorists to succeed. As John comes to realize just

how dangerous this situation is, and how he is basically the only hope the hostages have

for leaving the building alive, he gets more and more in touch with his primal instincts as

he gets more and more playful and inventive with his kills as the movie progresses. The

movie ends with a showdown between John and Hans that references Western movie

lore. Hans makes John drop his weapon since he has a gun to Holly's head but

unbeknownst to Hans, John has strapped a gun to his back, which he quickly makes use

of as he shoots Hans and rescues Holly. Outside, one of Hans' henchmen thought dead

reemerges and Powell kills the terrorist. John introduces Holly to Officer Powell, and

Holly introduces herself as Holly McClane.

Although still obviously conceived of, produced and released as a major

Hollywood motion picture, and by virtue of this in most ways had to reflect normative

American values in order to be successful, *Die Hard* is a reflective of changing values in

the commercial marketplace, such as the decline of American prosperity and women in

the workforce. As the protagonist of the film takes down terrorists one by one in an effort

to save his estranged wife, the audience is treated to numerous breaks in the action where McClane drops little bits of exposition about the breakdown of his marriage and his estrangement from his family. The fact that the script never completely details the dissolution of the family can be excused in that such focus would make this less of an adrenaline-fueled adventure and more of a melodrama, effectively changing its format and hoodwinking the people who paid to see a blockbuster action movie, but this chapter argues that the story of John and Holly, is microcosmic of the types of relationships Reagan championed throughout his tenure.

It is important to note that one of the most crucial aspects of McClane's journey toward becoming a more sensitive husband is his negotiation with his own masculinity. In her seminal book on masculinity in the Reagan era, Susan Jeffords, a professor of English at the University of Washington, argues that Ronald Reagan's careful construction of his image offered the film industry insight into what audiences wanted to see. Reagan cast himself as a mythic hero for the country, citing his own characters and other masculine heroes as effective models of people who represented American ideals of liberty, individualism, militarism and anti-governmentalism. John McClane in many ways is presented as an idealized Reaganite hero: a hard-working, muscular defender who loves the movies and doesn't understand his wife's desire to be more than a housewife. Most critically, McClane single-handedly saving the day from bureaucrats and terrorists speaks to the way films of the era reflect the dominant ideology Reagan and his administration pushed. As Jeffords notes, "Outsiders- foreigners, terrorists, criminals, communist governments, and any U.S. citizens skeptical of the Reagan resurgence- criticize Reagan values as reactionary, harking back to an earlier era in which the United

States could effectively play the world's cowboy-hero, wielding guns to stop criminals and evildoers, always on the side of justice" (Jeffords 61). The interference John McClane faces at every turn in this film mirrors the roadblocks Reagan himself claimed to have faced from people who he viewed to be both domestic and foreign threats. While it cannot be denied that the protagonist of this film faces similar uphill battles, the way he becomes so remorseful and introspective about his past mistakes with his wife does stand out as one fairly liberal thread in an otherwise conservative fantasy narrative. McClane's gradual realization of the errors of his ways is accompanied by the possibility of death lurking around every corner in the form of fire, bullets and glass and without this threat of death, these realizations likely would have never dawned on him.

As such, the film provides various heartfelt scenes that argue that being a man is more than just about providing for your family financially and physically, and this was fairly unconventional for a blockbuster at the time. In a book called *Murdering Masculinities*, Greg Forter notes how traditional crime novels celebrate male power and invulnerable masculinity. On top of this, Forter tracks a new tradition that encourages male readers and characters alike to embrace desires for self-dissolution that prior to this movement was labelled as strictly feminine. Thus, traditional masculinity is "murdered" as more nuanced protagonists emerge that are able to more effectively balance their jobs with their psyches. Although Forter focuses on close readings of detective novels, the same basic formula applies to McTiernan's film and is worth exploring more in depth.

Holly's absence from John's life along with John's inability to truly reflect on her decision until faced with her potential demise eschews the emotionally dangerous ethos that the President was so fond of: this helps gives credence to Greg Forter's claim that

popular detective stories are actually deeply thoughtful meditations on masculinity and violence. Forter himself started writing a detective story to try to make sense of his mothers' death when he was only twelve years old, although the manuscript ultimately fell to the wayside like many other aspects of his life at the time: it was "consigned to darkness by some unfathomable yet familiar force" (Forter 2). This familiar, dark force that Porter talks about is a force that many Americans both during Reagan's tenure and afterwards could likely relate to as the disconnect between the ideals he was loudly and confidently advocating for and the stark reality of most actual citizens struggling to make ends meet amidst the ultra-consumerist cultural and economic landscape. This is not to say that prior to Reagan taking office this disconnect did not exist, however it was emphasized to such a degree during his tenure that the disconnect became more obvious and prominent. While at its core it is an action film produced to appeal to the masses, McTiernan's film offers many moments throughout its runtime of a leading man in as much emotional turmoil as his smart and resourceful businesswoman-wife is in physical danger. This film seems to give credence to Forter's claim that masculinity may need to be murdered in order to reinvent it (Forter 4), and I would argue that *Die Hard* takes this a step further by implying that this murder might actually be able to save marriages as well. Later films in the series would complicate this by continually throwing monkey wrenches in their relationship when Holly (Bonnie Bedelia) was written out of the franchise after *Die Hard 2*, but that came down to ageism according to Bedelia. Sadly, even the most progressive of film scripts can and often do turn into muddled franchises that become plagued by questionable decisions on the part of producers, made especially

ironic by the fact that this first script in the series sought to offer solutions to insidious problems caused by living in a capitalistic society.

The social commentary is quite potent, though, in this film as detailed in the dynamics of John and Holly's devolving marriage. When action films from the Reagan era featured a love story, oftentimes one of two love narratives would unfold: the hero meets or renews a relationship with an equally tough adventurous woman along the journey toward saving the day such as Marion Ravenwood from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or, the hero is in a good relationship with someone at the beginning of the film and the hero must either leave the woman behind to go save the day or rescue her from the clutches of the bad guys throughout the course of the film such as Jennifer McFly in *Back to the Future*. There were of course exceptions, and some films featured troubled, failing relationships that would be resolved by the end of the film in order to ensure a romantic Hollywood ending but not many action films delved into the inner torment of the hero and his true feelings about the rupture of his union with his wife the way this movie did. This movie makes it clear that relationships are complicated, and both people in the relationship have said and done hurtful things and are both remorseful in their own ways. At certain points in the movie, John's exhibition of feeling almost cost him dearly in his dealings with Gruber such as when he is starting to reveal information about his children to his newfound friend Officer Al Powell (Reginald VelJohnson), the only law enforcement member that believes McClane is the right person for the job to take down Gruber and his henchmen. The depiction of marital strife that hurt and affected both partners in a relationship was up until this point mainly reserved for different genres of

film, but such things impacting the narrative of an American action film in the 1980s felt new and refreshing.

From the beginning of the film, John's physical inability to get comfortable is shown, almost as if he predicts the action he will have to undertake in order to save both his wife and his marriage. The film opens with John McClane's plane touching down in Los Angeles, as he prepares to reunite with estranged wife Holly, who is now going by her maiden name Gennaro. John makes small talk with a fellow passenger as the passenger notices John is afraid of flying. Clutching onto the armrest next to him, McClane is shown to be tense and nervous. As they get ready to disembark the plane, McClane finally seems somewhat at ease as he mentions the following to the man after he notices John is carrying a gun and now the tables get turned and the fellow passenger begins to get nervous: "Trust me, I'm a cop. I've been doing this for eleven years". McClane then removes a giant stuffed teddy bear from the overhead compartment that he intends to give to his kids when he is reunited with them. From the beginning scene of the film, it is obvious that McClane's far more secure with his career than he is with his family. Throughout the events of the film, many references are made to McClane's profession, and most of the times this status is mentioned or alluded to, this is the closest McClane gets to being comfortable. Whenever his family or details about his personal life are on the table, he tenses up and often seems on the verge of a breakdown such as when he and Holly argue about her changing her name back to her maiden name. John has an immense fear of flying and of heights, but he willingly takes a long flight from New York to Los Angeles and accepts an invitation to a Christmas party at a skyscraper in order to try to save his marriage even though he knows he will feel very out of place at

the corporate Christmas party. Although he has deep-seated insecurities about opening himself up to a new kind of relationship with Holly, the beginning of the movie reveals that he is cautiously adaptable, but certainly has a hard time embracing the dynamics of late 1980s American domesticity.

McClane's insecurity continues and is exacerbated by a conversation that starts cordial and ends heated when he gets to Nakatomi Plaza, the building of the Japanese corporate giant for whom Holly works. The couple is clearly no longer physically intimate, and after Holly offers her spare bedroom to John to save him a long trip to his former Captains' house where he was originally planning to stay, John accepts but immediately puts his foot in his mouth and condemns Holly for using her maiden name at work. Although this blow-up is certainly his fault and unwarranted, something fairly unconventional for an action movie of the 1980s occurs next: instead of channeling his inner turmoil into outer rage and smashing and breaking things in Holly's office, John turns inward and instead chooses to self-reflect on his unnecessary reaction. He stands in front of a mirror in Holly's office, looks down and chastises himself.

President Reagan's hyper-focus on maintaining what he saw to be traditional American family values such as hard work, especially by fathers and husbands providing for their families, and proper immersion into familial and consumerist roles is mirrored by McClane's stubborn persona at the beginning of the film. While it is true that McTiernan's film is invested in the potential salvation of the cohesive family unit, there is an undeniable air of uncertainty about the situation even as the credits roll. As film lecturer Claire Jenkins notes in *Home Movies*, popular films serve as allegories for how the average nuclear family should be run according to societal standards. McClane is a

character "who embodies this tension between active male and more emotional nurturer: he is not a suburban breadwinner, rather he is a self-serving action hero whose family has suffered as a result" (Jenkins 28). Many action films of the era would excuse McClane's prioritizing of his career over his family, but the events of this film actually forces McClane to wrestle with his predisposed, old-fashioned ideals of what a man should be to and for his family and consider the fact that perhaps there is room for improvement. At the end of the film, once all the villains have officially been dealt with, Holly and John reunite for the first time since the fight in Holly's office. McClane also finally gets to meet Sgt. Al Powell, one of his only actual allies in law enforcement who was helping John from outside the building: he introduces Holly to him as Holly Gennaro, with a lightness in his voice as he drapes his arm around her shoulder. She corrects him and says McClane, to which John smiles and kisses her on the head. While Jeffords has a point in reading this scene as completely diminishing and in some cases even erasing Holly's agency as a business woman (Jeffords 61), it can and should be read as more of a leveling of the playing field. Holly can be both Gennaro and McClane, and John is finally realizing that relationships are about compromising and working together to ensure success both at home and in the workplace.

Although John's characterization at the beginning of the film is very much in line with the "family values" ethos engendered by Reagan's administration, it becomes clear to him throughout the course of events that transpire that life is not as clear-cut as politicians try to make it seem. Rather, he comes to realize that true relationships require discussion, mutual effort and compromise. The traditional societal roles for husbands and wives that he grew up with were archaic and counterintuitive to positive growth as a

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cohesive family unit. In fact, trying to rigidly abide by these roles is what leads to his estrangement with his wife in the first place, unwilling to move to California where she has landed her dream job. By extension, the people in power in American society of the 1980s was, although perhaps not intentionally, encouraging the same sort of fracture in countless relationships. The correlation between foreign policies of containment championed by Ronald Reagan and repressive family values is explored in depth by American historian Elaine Tyler May in her book *Homeward Bound*: "According to Reagan, threats to the nation emerged from feminists who allegedly shirked their domestic roles, and welfare mothers (usually represented as black, even though most women on welfare were white) who eschewed marriage in favor of the dole. The antidote, once again, was the nuclear family" (Tyler May, 15-16). Rather than continuing to mindlessly conform to antiquated and insulting beliefs, John's slow recognition that a woman can be both a devoted businesswoman and wife offered a critical, tangible representation of the importance of such self-reflection and how it could help to reconnect many people.

Although McLane has stronger family attachments than Dirty Harry or Rambo, the *Die Hard* series eventually provides audiences to the same kind of isolated hero. The ability for John and Holly's relationship to grow alongside both of their careers comes to ultimate fruition when it is revealed through context clues in *Die Hard 2* that Holly still works for the Nakatomi corporation and Holly and John now live together in Los Angeles, where Holly moved to start her career which started the rift in their marriage in the first film. Most archetypal 1980s blockbuster movies rarely veered from traditional damsel-in-distress narratives such as *Romancing the Stone* and *The Princess Bride*--- and

while *Die Hard* doesn't turn completely away from the tenets of the formulaic

blockbuster, it features McClane trying to learn new tricks and shows that real

relationships require sacrifice and honest conversation in order to survive and thrive. As

the franchise continued, however, Holly's character becomes disposable and McClane's

family man status gets in the way of his action hero status. While this is partly due to the

fact that actress Bonnie Bedelia was written out of the role, it is still noteworthy that the

longer the series endured, the less interested it became in John's personal life: as a matter

of fact, no love interests are present for the character after *Die Hard 2*. All of this being

said, the foundation of the character which was established in the late 1980s, is very

much depicted as a confused family man: he is forced to navigate throughout the first two

films the intricacies of a proper balance between work and family life, as well as being

started on a journey of realization that both partners in a relationship are entitled to

figuring out this balance for themselves. This was pretty antithetical to Reagan's ideals

about the American nuclear family. This film, along with others of the era including the

Terminator films, emphasizes that the tenets preached by the Reagan administration were

dangerous to the development and maintenance of a cohesive family unit.

Although in any relationship both people need to make concessions and sacrifices

in order to make it work, it is quite clearly shown that John has the lions' share of the

work to do, and his willingness to embrace vulnerability and confront the toxic

masculinity within that threatens his marriage is a great start. The negotiation of the

physical embodiment of toxic masculinity and the ability to dissect it and examine its

impact is explored by Greg Forter: "masculinity cannot be killed without first being

embodied, so that there is always tension and struggle, even to the point of textual

warfare, the appeal of male power battling and countering the appeal of its repudiation" (Forter 5). Both the physical pain he endures by allowing himself to be continually hurt in order to possibly save his wife and the other hostages and the emotional pain he grapples with are necessary in order to fully combat the dangerous concept of masculinity and its prominence in and stranglehold over the nuclear family.

A pivotal moment in John's gradual acceptance of the changing tide of domesticity comes when he is opening up to Sgt. Al Powell over the walkie-talkie following a close call with Gruber: McClane asks Powell to find his wife and relay a message to her if he doesn't make it out of the building alive. This message is heartfelt, thought out and delivered while fighting back tears, the complete antithesis of what Holly had come to expect of John and even what John had expected from himself. It almost seems as if John is asking Powell for permission to get in touch with his emotions and is running the speech past him to see what another man thinks before Holly can hear it whether it be from Powell's mouth or John's. Previously, a formerly stoic Powell admitted to John that he has been on desk duty lately since he shot an unarmed kid so this also probably allowed John subconsciously to feel comfortable opening up to Al. This scene shows how these issues can overlap: struggles at work and marital strife. Earlier in the film, it is revealed that Al's wife is pregnant and it is implied that Al's reticence at returning to more active duty is causing financial turmoil amidst the growing family. John's kids are suffering for the opposite reason: their dad is a workaholic who does not want to change with the times, or let his wife help provide for their family so they can come back together as a cohesive unit. The bond developed between Al and John allows both of them to begin the healing process: John inspires Al to get back on the streets and

conquer his fear so he can play an active and present role in his family's growth, while Al inspires John to muster up the strength to defeat Hans once and for all and get back in Holly's good graces.

Most importantly for Holly and by extension audiences watching, John is finally prepared to say he is sorry for the way he has acted and open to being more supportive of Holly's career aspirations even as he appears to blow up her place of work at the end of the film. This openness to conversation and positive familial growth will be mutually beneficial to both John and Holly, the film suggests and this marks a fairly significant turning point in the Hollywood summer blockbuster. The 1990s would cement this trend more fully, starting with movies like *Die Hard 2* and *Terminator 2*, the latter being the more thoughtful of the two but even *Die Hard 2* featured several scenes of a more sensitive action hero at play, despite an overall weaker story. One scene of note in the first sequel to *Die Hard* comes when McClane is awaiting a fax at the airport where he is waiting for his wife Holly: a receptionist at the airport tries to pick him up but he quickly flashes his wedding band and returns to trying to figure out what mayhem is afoot at the airport and tries to make sure Holly is not in danger as a result. While of course she ends up being in danger, what matters is not just that John is a faithful husband, but that is the faithful husband of a career woman, anxious to reunite with her at her parents' house for Christmas after they both wrap up their respective jobs before their holiday celebrations. In the first film, John shares a sultry look with a flight attendant on his flight to Los Angeles to attempt to celebrate Christmas with his estranged wife. Although John originally thought that upward mobility for Holly's career would somehow emasculate and embarrass him, it turned out that the new understanding that is on the verge of being

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formed between the two of them at the end of the first film is exactly what their marriage needed in order to ward off thoughts of infidelity.

The audience is not privy to an actual conversation between the two at the end of the first film, but the brief back and forth they share about Holly's last name speaks volumes, in addition to the fact that Holly doesn't stare longingly and lovingly into John's eyes as she says "McClane". It seems pretty clear, and the second film affirms this through visual clues, that Holly has no intention of sacrificing her career and John has finally learned the lesson that he should not want her to make this sacrifice anyway. Although the film doesn't completely do away with traditional Hollywood tropes, as Holly does get relegated to the damsel-in-distress role for quite a bit of the runtime, one thing remains constant throughout the first two *Die Hard* films: Holly and John are an honest couple who work through their personal differences together. In a book chronicling the depiction of women's rights in blockbuster action movies, film critic Elizabeth Abele notes how John and Holly "are not the stock long-suffering, passive woman and the hard-bitten, stoic man (just 'doing his duty')--but a couple battling to understand themselves better and make their relationship work" (Abele 6). Many critics dismiss *Die Hard* as a mere body spectacle action film, and in some ways, these points cannot be overlooked or ignored but it is also reflective of the time it was released in, and even reflective of its hero: a cautious but thoughtful glimpse into the possibility of a new paradigm of masculinity in the vein of Greg Forter's claim that the film is tinged with emotion and remorse for the misguided and restrictive norms of the past.

As important as the relationship between John and Holly is to understanding the slight sea shift at play in regards to gender roles, it is equally important to discuss the

evolution of the action movie villain. Whereas most villains in these films had political agendas at the heart of their devious plans, Hans Gruber is simply a thief who used to be a terrorist pretending that he still cares about ideology. At the same time, Holly's boss Mr. Takagi as well as coworkers like Ellis are shown to be as dedicated and willing to potentially die for money as Gruber and his goons are. Before Gruber's true intentions are revealed, he asks Mr. Takagi for the combination to the safe that contains over 600 million dollars in bearer bonds. Takagi is perplexed why terrorists are so interested in money, until Gruber enlightens him: they are not stereotypical terrorists motivated by ideology, just pretending to be to enhance the fear of their hostages so that their plans to steal the bearer bonds go off without a hitch. Takagi is unwilling to provide the code to Gruber, saying that even if he provided the code, it could be changed in Tokyo very quickly and it is just one of seven safeguards Gruber would have to bypass. All of this being said, Gruber probably would've killed Takagi no matter what but it is telling how he isn't even willing to give up the code he knew in an attempt to possibly save his life. Takagi is controlled by a more socially acceptable form of greed than Gruber and his posse, but as Gruber points out, his company still profits off of a legacy of greed and deceit. Although Takagi is shown to be a fairly genial and likable boss, Hans makes it known that there are many similarities between them, the most obvious one being that both appreciate the finer things in life like designer suits: in fact, one of Hans' last pleas to Takagi is that he would hate to see such a nice suit ruined. Out of all of Hans' threats, this does seem to be the one that hits closest to home for the businessman, which perhaps validates some of Gruber's points. Most action films of the era show that the tenacity and strong moral fiber of the hero are as important as his brawny, hard body in defeating the

usually international villains trying to thwart American commerce at every turn. *Die Hard* features a hero in the process of reinventing himself and realizing that what he thinks is morally right is actually part of a facade that is ruining his marriage and threatening his relationship with his kids, as well as a villain who is only seeking to thwart American commerce since he wants to usurp it and reap the financial benefits for himself.

Although a former terrorist, Gruber has become an empty threat in terms of geopolitical warfare, and he is now just seeking to become rich at all costs. In many ways, nothing could be more American. At one point, Holly calls out Gruber for his posturing when in reality he only cares about money, but this can and should be seen also as a reflection on American values and politics in the 1980s, all essentially fueled because of money: the propagation of capitalism and consumerism. After all, one of the biggest insults he sneers at is when Holly calls him a common thief to which he quickly retorts that he is an "exceptional thief," indicating that his thievery is something he is proud of and feels clever about.

The main Western movie being referenced at the end of the film is one of the earliest examples of the revisionist Western in Hollywood: *High Noon* (1952). *High Noon* features a small-town sheriff standing alone against a vicious outlaw amidst a townful of fearful and selfish people who seem to resent the law and order the sheriff has brought to the town. At the time the film was released, McCarthyism was rampant in the United States, with Sen. Joseph McCarthy launching a witch hunt against liberals, fearing them to be Communists or Communist sympathizers. Hans mistakenly quips that the storybook ending of Grace Kelly walking into the sunset with John Wayne will not be

happening this time. Holding a gun to Holly's head, Hans assumes that he has won and starts laughing hysterically as John rips a gun off that he has taped to his back and shoots Hans and the remaining henchman. This mix-up on Hans' part is indicative of his overall shortsightedness: as educated and wry as he is, his fatal flaw is that he is no match for someone who pays attention to the lessons of Western films. John, despite all of his flaws, is a family man at heart who wants to do right by the people he loves even if he sometimes prioritizes the wrong things and has a tendency to be hotheaded. Meanwhile, perhaps Grubers' mix-up of the actors that starred in *High Noon* serves a purpose other than to belie the point that John McClane is a better student in American pop culture history. Whereas *High Noon* was intended by its writer to combat the horrors of McCarthyism, McClane must in essence take on the role of Marshal Will Kane from *High Noon* in order to fight this generation's enemy: misappropriation of capitalist ideology. John is fighting with it both internally and externally: internally due to pouring himself too much into it initially to the point that his marriage suffered, and externally due to the fact that he must physically fight Hans who is appropriating the tangible financial aspect of capitalist culture without actually being a true believer in capitalism. In fighting Hans externally, John is able to realize what is truly important to him and is able to work through a good amount of his internal problems.

The kind of work John decides to undertake at the end of the film is going to be hard to do amidst an only slightly changing socioeconomic landscape that surrounds him. Furthermore, for real societal change to occur, many have to undertake similar journeys in personal discovery: although in many ways it may seem futile, it is still worth taking the time to showcase a potential example for positive growth and that way at least a little

hope can be had at an eradicating of the concept of toxic masculinity as depicted in film. In addition, despite becoming more attuned with his wife and realizing his toxic masculinity was preventing him from true connection with Holly, John still saves the day through decisive action, gunfights, and by blowing up the Nakatomi Building, muddling the films' message about hypermasculinity. Hans, on the other hand, is punished because he is a self-centered thief who no longer believes in anything except money. As morally corrupt as Ellis is, and as questionable as the morals of the Nakatomi Corporation in general are, Gruber wants money under no ideological convictions and does not care who he kills to obtain it. Hans' Grace Kelly comment becomes even more potent when remembering the role her character Amy played in *High Noon*: a pacifist who springs into action to save her loyal and brave husband, the town's sheriff, from a ruthless criminal and the spineless citizens he has devoted his life to protecting. Whereas Amy in *High Noon* does the right thing for the greater good (and to save the life of her husband) even though it violates her own ethical code, Hans in *Die Hard* ultimately dies because he is a greedy foreigner who stands for nothing. His misreading of the *High Noon* ending is a perfect testament to this: perhaps if he had become fully indoctrinated into American society after giving up his terrorist affiliation (an earlier scene in the film has him posing as a bumbling American colleague of Holly's named Bill Clay), he would realize the importance of turning to movie characters as idealized American citizens. Similarly, Ellis is punished because he has forgotten to be a good American, caring only about money and status, and turning his back on American values: he cares more about cocaine, money and lechery than about starting a family.

Since film does mirror actual prevalent societal concerns such as corporate greed and toxic nuclear family dynamics, films like *Die Hard* were and remain important as without them, perhaps evolving societal mindsets on the topic would have taken even longer to come about. Susan Jeffords' contention that Gruber "recognized what many did not, that the foundation for this resurgence of power lay in the images of a mediated past, images produced by earlier eras equally in need of heroes to rely on" (Jeffords 62-63) is worth further exploration. The American film industry has traditionally offered audiences caricatures of ideal American citizens standing up against equally exaggerated foreign threats whose goal is to disrupt American commerce and question the moral and civic fabric of society. The final confrontation between John McClane and Hans Gruber speaks to this dichotomy quite poetically: the showdown features Gruber implying that McClane likens himself to Western stars John Wayne, Roy Rogers and Gary Cooper. The concept of manifest destiny is alluded to by Hans in his encounter with Takagi, and McClane's rugged individualism is not unlike that of traditional Western stars such as Gary Cooper and John Wayne. Hans essentially justifies his villainous deeds right up to the last showdown by pointing out the hypocrisy of America: its leaders of commerce and industry monopolize and control countless American businesses and lives. He also points out the legacy of greed of the Nakatomi Corporation, which reflects the overall anxiety Americans had about the rapidly growing and successful Japanese economy during the 1980s. Even the main setting of the film, a corporate high-rise, proves this indisputable fact. Although it's a holiday party, many of the characters depicted as workers in the building cannot get their minds off of work-related pablum: the most obvious example

being Holly's immoral coworker Ellis who is purely motivated by financial gain and is presented as a shell of a man as a result.

Holly's immoral coworker Ellis is presented as a microcosm of everything wrong with American business in the 1980s, and his hubris and greed costs him his life. The character can be seen as indicative of the consequences of a society that encourages greed and productivity over all else. In Reagan's America, Reaganomics certainly engendered a fertile ground for rampant economic corruption as it emphasized deregulation and bringing down of the inflation rate to foster confidence in the economy. Although the President warned against insider trading in several statements as far back as 1984, his policies and philosophy on proper engagement with the American economy made it tempting for people like Ellis to lose sight of ethics in the pursuit of success. The success of Japanese business in the 1980s is likely due to several important factors including hyperawareness of their reliance on other countries for food, energy and raw materials rather than arrogant nationalism. Most importantly, as Peter Drucker points out in the Harvard Business Review, "No group is expected to be completely unselfish or to advocate policies that might cost it money, power, or votes; Japan's Confucian tradition distrusts self-sacrifice as unnatural. Each group is, however, expected to fit its self-interest into a framework of national needs, national goals, national aspirations, and national values" (Drucker 1). Whereas Reagan ushered in a decade of competitive immersion into consumer culture in the name of nationalism, Japanese citizens worked together to build their economy through hard work and respect for one another. Complications such as multi-million dollar mergers arose between Japan and the United States, and the Nakatomi Corporation is an example of this: CEO Takagi comes across as

a deeply conflicted man, torn between his Japanese roots of honorable business practices and a very American sense of valuing money over life itself. The character has a truly ambiguous ending: we never truly know if he knew the code to the vault before Hans kills him, which further speaks to the tension in the air regarding Japan-US relations. Right before he is brutally executed by Hans, Takagi's employee Ellis waxes poetic about the difference between him and Hans which is one of the most concrete examples of the fact that they really have a lot more in common than one might think: Hans uses a gun while Ellis uses a fountain pen. Indeed, Ellis is actually an exaggerated sell-out of American values, trained subtly for so long to care about the proliferation of the economic stability of their family, their company and their country, and basically in that order. In order to provide for one's family, one has to be loyal to their company, and in turn one contributes to the growth of their nations' economy, but at the same time each person's own autonomy becomes increasingly limited or eliminated. Debord outlines the disheartening truth in his *Society of the Spectacle*:

> The concentrated spectacle belongs essentially to bureaucratic capitalism, even though it may be imported as a technique of state power in mixed backward economies or, at certain moments of crisis, in advanced capitalism. In fact, bureaucratic property itself is concentrated in such a way that the individual bureaucrat relates to the ownership of the global economy only through an intermediary, the bureaucratic community, and only as a member of this community. Moreover, the production of commodities, less developed in bureaucratic capitalism, also takes on a concentrated form: the commodity the

bureaucracy holds on to is the totality of social labor, and what it sells back to

society is wholesale survival. (Debord, #64)

Life under the society of the spectacle is unquestioning, passive and ensures the thriving of corporations while simultaneously forcing individuals to view themselves as good representations of how well the system works. People like Ellis have shallow and cocky personalities because they have been conditioned to believe that status, status symbols and the accumulation of money is what makes someone successful. It is helpful to CEO's for their employees to feel this way as it will allow their businesses to thrive and will prevent social upheaval as everyone will stay busy trying to compete with and show up their colleagues. The above quote from Debord indicates that people like Ellis are trapped in this bureaucratic system, and whether they consciously realize it or not, they are nothing more than slaves to the spectacle of the powers-that-be, which in the case of Nakatomi stands in for the average American conglomerate corporation. Holly is not immune to this either, since she is employed by the same company although she does not allow herself to become morally corrupt ala Ellis. Nevertheless, all of the workers are somehow trapped by the construct of American industry in general which essentially forces citizens into tacit compliance with the status quo. Hans, a former terrorist who now only cares about money and power, seems to relish the fact that Holly's corporate cronies are carbon copies in many ways of himself and we are left to wonder if Hans' sharp observations of the uncanny correlation between capitalism and terrorism led to him turning away from "traditional terrorist" activity and into his current foray into purely economic terrorism. Furthermore, the depictions of Ellis and Takagi alongside Hans' depiction begs the question of whether or not the Nakatomi Corporation itself is a perfect

microcosm of how American corporate practices are a form of economic terrorism. Hans and Ellis are cut from the same cloth in many ways. In fact, they are wearing very similar suits in their pivotal scene together where Ellis tries to treat Hans as one of his typical negotiation cases. They also have a dislike of John McClane in common since he doesn't speak the language of negotiations, but rather in decisive action which leads to the saving of as many "innocent civilians" as possible.

Although the message of the film seems to indicate that there is no such thing as a truly innocent civilian in corporate America, or at least that civilians can be easily compelled to deceit in order to be successful, John himself doesn't offer his verbal opinion on the matter. Instead, the film really runs for providing an answer as to what's wrong with America. John is interested in saving Ellis' life even knowing that Ellis is willing to sell him out. Although he doesn't speak the same corrupt corporate language as Ellis, being witness to his antics as well as Hans' reign of terror likely helps him along his own journey of self-discovery that blind devotion to any cause, be it for financial reasons, civic, or a combination of the two, is dangerous and no individual should consider themselves to be above self-reflection and inner growth. Such reflection can lead to more enriching relationships with loved ones and help to keep hostilities and transgressions at home and in the workplace to a minimum.

Just as McLane really offers no path for American patriotism (other than violence), the film comes to illustrate that his frantic energy is all just a part of Debord's spectacle. Guy Debord's theories outlined in *The Society of the Spectacle* illustrate quite well how Reagan's society has tricked people like Ellis into thinking that the desire to be rich is paramount to corporate and personal success, all the while what's really happening

is the divide grows between the rich and the poor as a result and the members of the working class competing for riches are burning the candle at both ends for no reason. Hans is shown as an example of what happens when a quest for riches is not at least superficially predicated on the basis of stimulating the economy of the nation one represents:

> The victory of the autonomous economy must at the same time be its defeat. The forces which it has unleashed eliminate the economic necessity which was the immutable basis of earlier societies. When economic necessity is replaced by the necessity for boundless economic development, the satisfaction of primary human needs is replaced by an uninterrupted fabrication of pseudo-needs which are reduced to the single pseudo-need of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy. The autonomous economy permanently breaks away from fundamental need to the extent that it emerges from the social unconscious which unknowingly depended on it. (Debord, #51)

The ultimate symbolic representation of Debord's assertion about the critically close boundaries of success and defeat in the autonomous economy is the falling of the bearer bonds at the same time as the corporeal villain of the script, Hans Gruber. In actuality, the true villain of the film is American society's fixation on all the wrong things: financial acumen over compassion, appearances versus genuine human feelings, money over all else. The film features various characters whose ethics are as dubious as Gruber's, and in some cases arguably even worse. Characters like Ellis are already in too deep to even realize the extent of the fecklessness of their self-serving ideologies, but there is hope for characters like Holly and John who witness that blind devotion to any

cause directly can lead to one's downfall, and worse yet, can even lead to widespread societal disarray.

The resolution of the movie features bearer bonds falling from the sky alongside Gruber, essentially showing that if you live by money, you die by money. The enormous sum of bearer bonds that Hans is seeking to run away with indeed begs the question if anyone even needs that kind of money but what's even more intriguing than this is the fact that Takagi is so hellbent on protecting the company's bottom line that he is willing to sacrifice his life for it. It is also heavily implied that the 640 million dollars of bearer bonds being requested is the equivalent of approximately two weeks of operating capital for the corporation. Even if Takagi was right that the code Gruber requested wouldn't have gotten him very far, it stands to reason that the only possible way Gruber would consider keeping him alive would be if he provided the code or codes he had. At the end of the day, corporate greed trumps even the most ambitious criminals' greed and it becomes increasingly obvious how blurred the lines are between criminal and CEO. However, this was shown earlier in the film, albeit a bit more subtly when Mr. Takagi was shot and killed by Hans due to his non-compliance. Ellis similarly meets his demise as a direct result of his arrogance, thinking that his greedy mindset as a result of corporate brainwashing will get him out of his predicament with Hans. The correlation between desired wealth and appearance is emphasized on in the film as well. As Susan Jeffords has argued about McLane and other 1980s heroes, McLane's bare chest says it all: The hero of the film starts off the film in ordinary clothes, then goes into Holly's office bathroom to change into a more suitable outfit for an office party but before he can get fully dressed, Hans and his team begin their reign of terror. John starts fighting them off

in a tank top and dress pants and by the end of the movie is completely shirtless. On the

other hand, Hans, his team, and the corporate party goers are all dressed to the nines.

While there is some degree of practicality and necessity involved in John's decision to

progressively strip down as the events of the film unfolded, it is quite telling how as the

film goes on, John seems to adapt very well and even to a degree seems to revel in the

destruction of the corporate setting and taking down Hans' crew in the process, despite

the fact that he is certainly interested in saving his estranged wife's life as quickly as

possible.

Perhaps it's this gradual shift toward primitivism that is the most concrete

example the film offers of the ephemeral nature of life in general as well as financial

stability. *Die Hard* offers not corrective politics at all--- it really flees from them in its

spectacular energy. In addition, the Nakatomi building in general speaks volumes about

this, on both a meta level and within the confines of the film structure itself. First, the

Nakatomi Plaza is based off of what was known at the time as Fox Plaza, a commercial

building that had just opened and happened to have a famous law firm named Jeffer

Mangels specializing in entertainment law as one of its first tenants. There is delicious

irony in the fact that a film critical of the practices of commercial buildings and

companies highlighted an actual edifice that was made famous by the film, and both the

building and the film helped to make each other famous in a similar way to King Kong

and the Empire State Building in 1933. Secondly, on a filmic narrative level, the gradual

destruction of the building right up to the ending where the bearer bonds are free-falling

from the sky as the building burns in the background, is a melancholic but sobering affair

where all of a sudden all of the hard work and money that went into creating a building to

stimulate the American economy does not matter anymore. It becomes increasingly clear that money itself is a torturous symbolic concept that many Americans waste their lives trying to dominate, but in many cases, the opposite will be true and the commodified people themselves become either rendered useless or irrelevant. The film shows, although perhaps subtly, the undeniable correlation between a persons' socioeconomic autonomy and the environments that call such autonomy into question. At quite a number of junctures, the space the hero is confined in is limited and restricting, and this serves a definitive purpose. Eric Lichtenfeld is a film scholar who has been a consultant for many film releases on home video including *Die Hard*, and in a book chronicling the allure of blockbuster films to the public, he notes the following about John: "As he journeys through the building's core, the framing devices become industrial and menacing, including fan blades and the airshaft. These frames are captured as surely as the building has been. And as McClane conquers the terrorists, he also conquers the terrain. Therefore, his control of a scene dictates his control of the camera- or lack thereof" (Lichtenfeld 165). The building itself is depicted as dangerous and at numerous points, the bad guys exploit the building's destructive and harmful capacity, which serves to highlight John's primitive sensibilities and at the same time prove how being beholden to corporate America can be unwise. By the end of the movie, it is made clear that both John and Holly have some individual work to do before they can begin to repair their dynamic as a couple, with John needing to learn how to embrace his wife's career choices and also has to learn to adapt to a more corporate world in general, and Holly needing to better balance corporate ambition with family life. Holly and John both survive because the chaos they've endured has taught them how to balance home life and work life better:

although it's impossible to fully escape the socioeconomic pressures brought on by living in Reagan era America, they find out it's doable and the hard work begins as the credits roll.

Although by the end of the film John and Holly appear ready for positive change in their lives and their relationship, little has really changed at a systematic level. Bumbling bureaucracy and mindless conformity are not the answer but rather effective policing, work practices and teamwork among partners, coworkers and people in general can be a step in the right direction. Stephen Keane, a lecturer of film at the University of Leeds, notes the following about the heroic McClane in a book exploring the layered and nuanced themes of disaster films usually considered to be mere popcorn fodder: "McClane is a New York cop who has traveled to Los Angeles: and, furthermore, he goes on to fight a group of European terrorists who take control of the Japanese Nakatomi Tower. Like so many characters in 1970s disaster movies, McClane finds himself more or less isolated, and in unfamiliar surroundings. Similarly, hounded by bureaucratic police officials on the one side and fighting criminals on the other, McClane goes on to find himself in the middle of a crossfire of rules and transgressions" (Keane 52). Red tape and contorted ideologies pervade practically every frame of the film, and just as John points out that he is a "fly in the ointment, a pain in the ass" for the villainous Gruber, even many of the officials that should be trying to help de-escalate the situation are as much a fly in his own ointment as Hans is. Even though many of the sources of John's irritation, such as FBI Chief Dwayne Robinson and slimy reporter Dick Thornburg (even his name is indicative of his prickliness) haven't learned any lessons by the end of the film due to their willful ignorance, what's important to note is that John and Al come to

forgive themselves for their former actions by realizing that the only truly unforgivable thing in life is to not learn from your mistakes and to value societal constructs (money, relationship dynamics, and so on) over concrete relationships.

Die Hard came on the scene at a time when Japanese businesses were eclipsing American ones but consumerist ideology was still being pushed and faith in American capitalism was still as thriving as ever. For this reason and also just by virtue of the fact that it was meant to be a typical blockbuster movie, there was certainly no indication that the production team was trying to advocate for a complete overthrow of American consumer values. In fact, like *The Terminator* and other movies that questioned certain aspects of capitalistic life, it would not be in their best interests to push such a message since filmmakers depend as much on audiences as the audiences depend on the movie industry to keep them entertained. Because of this symbiotic relationship, the film's engagement with some of the weaker elements of American ideology remains admirable. While many critics wrote off *Die Hard* as just another albeit entertaining popcorn movie, it is a mistake to dismiss it as such. The film, like *Jurassic Park*, exists on an endless loop of ironic reciprocal capitalism, bringing up America's changing fortunes but not really thinking too much about it.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Confronting the Cyborg Within in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*

In this chapter, I turn to the surprisingly family friendly sequel *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* where the martial logic of the first film seems to have come up short. The weightlifting, hard bodied heroine Sarah Connor, has become so obsessed with preventing Armageddon that she is willing to kill anyone who gets in her way. Her former enemy, the Terminator, has suddenly been reprogrammed to help her, and the film completely inverts the technophobia of its predecessor. The old Terminator (the T-800) actually becomes a boy's friend. In this chapter, I argue that *Terminator 2* actually softens Susan Jeffords' insight into "hard bodied" masculinity of the earlier Reagan era, trying to re-build domestic affection as it retreats from its militarism. As an allegory for Reagan's America, however, the old Terminator has turned into a useful political tool that volunteers to destroy itself when its services are no longer needed, as America's military was able to stand down after the fall of the Soviet Union. As the Terminator descends into the molten pit, it raises its thumb patriotically in a selfless act of validating Reagan's vision. In chapters one and two, I argued that the films of the early 1980s reacted in various ways to the policies and ideology of the early years of Reagan's presidency. *The Terminator* both criticized and celebrated the reckless and dangerous practices that Reagan's administration engendered such as the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Films such as, but certainly not limited to, *Back to the Future*, barely even mentioned the concept of nuclear war let alone showed the repercussions of it. Whenever *Back to the Future* did address this issue which had reached a boiling point by the time of the films' production process, it was addressed for laughs in the same way the film

laughed off other serious topics such as incest and sexual abuse (see chapter two for more). Doc Brown's dealings with the Libyans in particular paint him as a quirky inventor who is willing to do anything to achieve his dreams and the Libyans are treated as foolish "bad guys" in the scenario. If *Back to the Future* sought to cement with audiences the importance of immersing in and contributing to the culture of competitive consumerism regardless the cost, *The Terminator* was there as a stark contrast to show how the shortsightedness of the American military-industrial complex could prove to be apocalyptic. While Reagan himself is never directly referred to in either of the first two *Terminator* films, his presence looms quite heavily in the background. Since the franchise originated in the throes of the pre-glasnost era of Reagan's tenure, Cameron's second endeavor with this saga spent the majority of its running time dealing with the psychological aftermath of Reagan's early years as President vis a vis another action parable about nuclear anxiety. While the first film explored the dangerous possibility of a future war, the characters in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* are still paradoxically dealing with the ramifications of the political climate that enabled the rise of the machines in the first place. In this chapter, I will show how the film softens the edges of the original film, now trading in the horror elements of the original for an action/adventure film that doubles as a coming-of-age film for a preteen John Connor.

The film inverts audience expectations by revealing that bad technology can be repurposed to protect us from even worse technology: a Terminator of the same model that originally was programmed to kill Sarah Connor has been captured and reprogrammed by future John Connor to go back in time to protect his younger self and his mother from a newer, deadlier Terminator model, the T-1000. In 1995 Los Angeles,

John's mother Sarah is incarcerated in a mental hospital for her violent efforts to prevent

the end of the world from happening. John and the reprogrammed T-800 break Sarah out

of the mental hospital, with the T-1000 in hot pursuit. Though distrustful of the T-800,

Sarah uses its knowledge of the future to learn that a revolutionary microprocessor, being

developed by Cyberdyne engineer Miles Dyson, will be crucial to Skynet's creation. Over

the course of their journey, Sarah begins to realize that the Terminator is the closest thing

to a father figure John has ever had. Sarah plans to escape to Mexico with John, but a

nightmare about Judgment Day convinces her to track down and kill Dyson instead. Just

as she is about to gun him down as his wife and son stare in horror, John arrives and has

an emotional moment with Sarah while the T-800 convinces Dyson of the future

ramifications of his work. Dyson reveals his research has been reverse engineered from

the CPU and severed arm of the 1984 Terminator. Sarah, John, Dyson and the T-800 vow

to destroy Cyberdyne to prevent the apocalypse from happening. The police assault the

building and fatally shoot Dyson, but he detonates the explosives as he dies. The T-1000

pursues the Connors, cornering them in a steel mill. Once John, Sarah and the T-800

manage to defeat the T-1000 by shooting it and making it fall into a molten steel pit, The

T-800 explains it must also be destroyed in the steel in order to truly prevent Skynet from

rising. Despite John's protests, the T-800 convinces him its destruction is the only way to

protect the future of humanity. Sarah extends her hand to the T-800 to thank him for

protecting her son before lowering him into the steel. The T-800 gives John a thumbs-up

as it is incinerated. As Sarah drives down a highway with John, she reflects on her

renewed hope for an unknown future.

There are many action set pieces which depict destruction, death and overall mayhem, but these scenes are ultimately effective because they punctuate the consequences of what can happen when technology, the military industrial complex and hubris collide. Many theorists that talk about this film address these ramifications, but perhaps no one as in depth and clearly as Susan Jeffords. In her influential book *Hard Bodies* on how Reagan's image is reflected in American movies of the 1980s and even the 1990s, Jeffords discusses how the concept of masculinity was renegotiated in popular films following the Vietnam era. She explores how Reagan's image that he had started to form as an actor and gradually refined as he entered the political arena perfectly reflected what many Americans looked for in a leader: someone who stands up for liberty, militarism, and individualism. Indeed, his Hollywood background enabled him to rise to an almost mythic status in the eyes of many Americans before even taking office. Jeffords describes how movies meshed inextricably with Reagan's life as in his speeches, he cast himself as a hero and influenced many American citizens to blindly believe the same script. Invoking Clint Eastwood in his speeches and treating scenes from movies as if they were real, Reagan played on his image in order to link popular and political narratives. Jeffords notes that Hollywood returned the compliment by churning out countless films that reflected Reaganite values like hard work, consumption and a solid nuclear family.

As seen with the first entry in the franchise, Cameron's script for *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* does not absolve the political leaders and consumer innovators of the fictionalized version of America the franchise presents. Rather, it forces viewers to sit with and carefully meditate on a great many real world issues especially but not limited

to the omnipresent threat of nuclear weapons. In regards to *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, Jeffords argues that the reprogramming of the Terminator model from the first film is representative of a conscious societal effort to renegotiate masculinity by inverting former tenets of American masculinity. Schwarzenegger's character in this film learns that is possible to solve problems without resorting to death and violence, mirroring Reagan's shifting tone in dealing with foreign threats, specifically in terms of Russia.

Sarah Connor is often times discussed as one of the strongest examples in the history of American summer blockbusters of an independent woman who transcends the typical tropes of many final girls: "Her fight has its source in the 'war business' of men and masculinized machines (she is dead by the time the 'female' Terminatrix of the third film appears) but her motivation to fight is based on her singular understanding of the risks involved for human society and this understanding is informed by her own visions and experiences of humanity, in particular, her love for Reese and for her unborn son" (Summerhayes 42). Her character is practically unrecognizable in the second outing: she is a gun-toting, physically intimidating force of nature with a singular mission, not unlike the very Terminators she goes to battle with. The characterization of the mother of the future had already drastically changed between the beginning of the first film to the end, going from a carefree, broke and romantically hopeless waitress to a determined woman fighting suddenly for not just her own survival but for that of her the life of her future son and the future of humanity itself. During the several year time gap between the two films, Sarah finds herself locked up in an insane asylum for speaking the truth about Skynet and its plan to annihilate the human race, and John ends up in foster care. Despite her stay at Pescadero State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Sarah remains steadfast in her quest

for physical strength and her determination to break out and find her son, certain that crushing the first Terminator in a hydraulic press was not enough to stop the development of an artificial intelligence that would be trusted to not turn against its creators. Of course, Sarah is right: Miles Dyson has been working tirelessly to reverse engineer the chip from the first Terminator and has high hopes of revolutionizing the technological landscape of the 1990s. Although his work will ultimately lead to Skynet's creation, Dyson himself has no idea that he is helping to create a program that will spell the end of humanity.

In perhaps the most impactful and poignant scene in the film, Sarah launches a full-blown assault on Dyson's house and tries to turn off her emotions with the greater good in mind: the sacrifice of one person in return for the potential salvation of the human race. When she gets up at point blank range, however, Sarah is unable to pull the trigger: seeing the fear in Dyson's eyes recenters her and reminds her of her own humanity. Although the movie makes it unclear whether or not Dyson knew about the potential for his technology to be used for "defense purposes," several references are made to the fact that he was told by his bosses to not ask too many questions about the original chip. Cameron's second foray into the *Terminator* universe seems most concerned with hammering home to viewers the dangers of people in positions of authority, and showing what the true price of ignorance and hubris can look like.

Dyson is representative of the inextricable link between ingenuity and immersion in the culture of competitive capitalism/consumerism, but in an unknowingly dangerous way— the complete antithesis of what *Back to the Future* posited a mere six years prior. Meanwhile, Sarah's journey epitomizes the magnitude of the consequences the concept

of a nuclear family can have. Interestingly, as Sarah points out in the first film, she didn't ask for the "honor" of carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders, but the films seem to advocate for more of a conscious effort to be aware of the forces that try to control your life, whether they be familial, governmental, work-related, or a combination, and take control- before someone or something else does. This makes the central motto of the films seem even more crucial: "The future's not set. There is no fate but what we make for ourselves." Whereas *The Terminator* offered a fairly damning critique of the dominant socio-political landscape of America in 1984, *Terminator 2* is far more concerned with examining the aftermath of what could've happened. Although the characters themselves are in constant peril up until a few minutes before the end credits roll, the overall tone of the second film is more philosophical and reflective as it ponders Armageddon. Like many films of its day, *Terminator 2* flirts with annihilation. Rather than generating horror, James Berger notes that these films also are marketed as a kind of spectacular exhilaration--- "a fascinating pleasure":

> The world is poised to end and is so suffused with moral rottenness and technological, political, and economic chaos and/or regimentation that it should end and must end, and it must end because in some crucial sense it has ended. This weird blend of disgust, moral fervor, and cynicism helps explain the enormous, ecstatic, fascinated pleasure many people in late-twentieth century America feel in seeing significant parts of their world destroyed- over and over in all the *Die Hards*, *Terminators*, *Twisters*, *Dante's Peaks*, *Asteroids* and *Independence Days* (Berger 7).

Sarah's recurring nuclear nightmare is actually the impetus for her assault on Dyson's house and her motivation for almost shooting him dead point blank. It is quite important that it is this film, released mere weeks after Boris Yeltsin was voted into office in the first Presidential election in Russia's history. The Soviet Union had been dwindling in power for quite some time prior to this, culminating in the Declaration of State Sovereignty in June 1990. Prior to this, Reagan's relationship with Gorbachev had been considerably improved, and tensions died down between the superpowers. The film dwells on world destruction but does so only to ultimately retreat from it by the end of the film. As horrifying as the images of nuclear war are that occasionally appear in this sequel, the "bad Terminator" of the original film becoming good inspires Sarah to believe in the potential for humanity again.

In addition to practical reasons, on a storytelling level it somehow seems more appropriate to include these apocalyptic scenes in *Terminator 2* as opposed to in *The Terminator*. Sarah Connor stands in as a proxy for the viewer in the original film, imagining what the apocalypse could be like if the end of the road America kept going down was reached. By the time *Terminator 2* was released, many audience members were slightly more relieved in terms of global tensions as the threat of nuclear war had greatly decreased. Cameron's film drives the point hard, however, that the threat can never be vanquished with absolute certainty as long as nuclear weapons and the capability to produce more are out there. Furthermore, Sarah's longing for humanity at the end of the film is made possible by witnessing "bad technology" turn good, so this seems to imply that interaction with good technology can actually help humanity.

Sarah has many moments of panic throughout the narrative of the film which serve to accentuate the point that the horrors she has experienced can never be fully healed, even if nuclear peace lasts. This is perhaps best exemplified in a scene where she is rendered paralyzed with fear as she encounters the reprogrammed Terminator for the first time, at the time unaware of the fact that he is trying to help save the future this time, not destroy it. Unlike in many other popular films where women are depicted as damsels in distress in need of a male savior, Sarah's panic is justifiable and has actually rendered her more powerful in more ways than it has castrated her: "Abject terror may still be gendered feminine, but the willingness of one immensely popular current genre to represent the hero as an anatomical female would seem to suggest that at least one of the traditional marks of heroism, triumphant self-rescue, is no longer strictly gendered masculine" (Clover 60). Sarah's transformation from disenchanted waitress in the first film to hardened heroine in this film is presented as equal parts heartbreaking and necessary: her masculinization distances her from her son but it is always clear that she is trying to protect him. Sarah's gradual realization that emotional connection with her son is as important as physically protecting him allows for a better relationship with him, and learns this by observing the new, gentler Terminator's interactions with her sons. At one point, Sarah even remarks: "Of all the would-be fathers who came and went over the years, this thing, this machine, was the only one who measured up. In an insane world, it was the sanest choice". This serves a dual purpose of showcasing the lessons that can be learned by engaging responsibly with "good technology," and offering up a new version of a nuclear family, but one that learns to be more in touch with emotion while still remaining physically strong and vigilant.

Although some viewers of *Terminator 2* might be unsettled by the depictions of nuclear blasts, these same viewers are equally entertained by the villainous reigns of the Terminators and by the ultimate vanquishing of them by Sarah in the first film and Sarah and the reprogrammed T800 in the sequel. This symbiotic relationship is made possibly only through the specter of Armageddon that pervades both films but is only visibly depicted in the nightmare scenes of *Terminator 2*. This mirrors the symbiotic relationship in real life America between consumerism and strategic defense of American capitalist society that has led to the proliferation of nuclear weapons which could end humanity at any given time. These sobering nightmares of a fictional warrior perfectly encapsulate the dread viewers in the 1980s might have felt as they were watching the original film that such technological and military "advances" could end up destroying the world. The scene is unsettling and that is the point: to remind audiences that even though tensions have subsided, the possibility of such tensions returning is always in the air and this is why vigilance and engagement with issues of nuclear safety are of paramount importance.

Sarah Connor's nightmares, although unreal, come across as some of the sobering scenes of the whole franchise, since they constitute a concrete representation of all of the fundamental anxieties that fueled the franchise for decades and in many ways continue to fuel it. In the longest version of her nightmare shown in the film, Sarah approaches a playground that faces the sprawling LA landscape. The nightmare starts with a close-up on Sarah's military style boots, and she walks with a determined, calculated gait that harkens back to previous images of Schwarzenegger's original evil Terminator in the first film as well as a scene earlier in the sequel of his reprogrammed Terminator. This serves

the purpose of accentuating the peril this nightmare will bring in addition to sowing seeds that will be brought to fruition in the next scene when Sarah nearly assassinates Dyson. Tellingly, Sarah presses herself behind a chain link fence that frames her as both a victim and a prisoner of the future, much in the same way she has been since Reese passed the baton on to her in the mid 1980s. Further in the background, a lush, verdant landscape is present but somehow muted as the haunting, foreboding music in the background forces our attention toward Sarah's increasingly apprehensive face and away from the forest that surrounds the playground. The lush, beautiful background is depicted as ultimately irrelevant as the unknowing smiles on the faces of the parents and children playing with one another in the park. Sarah begins shouting and violently shakes the fence but all of her warnings fall on deaf ears just as her verbal warnings have for years in real life. She becomes belligerent to the point of sheer panic when she sees a visage of a life she was never allowed to live thanks to the invasion of the future in the past that has consumed her life and the destiny of her family. In fact, her family as depicted in these films is deeply contingent on the nightmare she is having. Seconds after Sarah dreams about playing with her son in a playground either before or after a shift as a waitress, the job she had before Kyle Reese and the Terminator would irrevocably change her life, a nuclear blast hits. As the bodies of everyone in the playground are burnt to a crisp, the camera focuses on Present Day Sarah and gruesomely shows her demise in a close-up shot before Sarah wakes up in a cold sweat, stabs a knife in the table she's sitting at and prepares to head to Dyson's house.

The film presents sacrifices that need to be made in order to avoid Armageddon, specifically that of Miles and the reprogrammed T-800. Prior to his sacrifice, Miles still

appears excited about the revolutionary work his company has achieved with microprocessors, even after he was told that his work would eventually lead to the death of millions. The scene paints Miles in a tragic light: an excited technological innovator who has to abandon his life work, and eventually his life itself, for the greater good. Jeffords notes how it is Miles' sacrifice of himself that the film posits as an unfortunately logical solution: "What finally saves humanity is not the power of the Terminator or the mothering of Sarah Connor but the individual will of the Terminator, and Miles Dyson before him, to sacrifice themselves to ensure that human life can go on" (Jeffords 176-177). Despite Dyson claiming he was unaware of the destructive potential of his work, his decision to sacrifice himself in order to potentially save the human race is depicted as noble but tragic that it had to happen in the first place. This serves as a warning to people of the consequences that unchecked and/or unquestioned "progress" can actually have. Miles' excitement even to the point of death about his life work indicates that the franchise remains steadfast in its claim that responsible use of technology is admirable, but it does come with risk, emphasizing the fine line between ingenuity and destructive capability.

It is true that *The Terminator* movies among many others would likely not have been possible in the first place without the threat of war with the USSR. However, as insightful as Berger's analysis is about the lure of destruction many blockbuster films indulge in, he glosses over the hopeful messages that permeate Cameron's second entry into the *Terminator* mythos. He points out that Sarah Connor's glimpses into the future as provided by the time-traveling father of her child from the first film function narratively to explain the impossibility of John Connor's existence but in a larger sense, her rants

about the apocalypse and nightmares of nuclear blasts provide somber meditation on the reality nuclear war could bring to the forefront in real life. His analysis of Cameron's films largely stops here, claiming that the dozens of apocalyptic and destructive images permeating action movies of the do nothing more than punctuate the cruel fact that the world not only will end but should end as a result of all the catastrophe that has been unleashed by the potential of nuclear destruction. Cameron, on the other hand, does not seem as pessimistic: while far from completely hopeful about America's ability to recover from the trauma of nuclear warfare, there are many moments of hope sprinkled throughout the film. Ironically, most of the moments of hope are provided by Arnold Schwarzenegger's character, who befriends the young Connor by making deadpan jokes and listening to his orders, whereas in the first film, his character was the ultimate embodiment of the consequences nuclear neglect could engender.

In fact, *Terminator 2* blames neither the United States nor Russia as villains here--- their antagonism becomes based on misunderstandings: when the reprogrammed Terminator is explaining to John how Skynet targets Russia in its first attack against humanity, John is confused seeing as how Russia has become an ally in recent years to the United States. The Terminator very matter-of-factly points out that Russia assumes the United States is the one who attacked them and fights back without asking questions. This speaks to both the extremely shaky and temperamental nature of political alliances especially in the specter of nuclear war, as well as the fact that actions have consequences: if the government had never turned to technology as a way of trying to troubleshoot diplomatic relations with other countries, none of this would be happening. Franchise heroine Sarah Connor knows this all too well, and her relationship with time

traveler Kyle Reese is proof perfect of the tragedy of the combination of nuclear proliferation and the hubris of mankind. Kyle is both sent from the future and sacrificed in the "present" to try to prevent the end of humanity. Kyle, Sarah and John form the first post-nuclear family, a convoluted and heartbreakingly fractured representation of the ramifications of the obsession with forming, policing and maintenance of the nuclear family in the "present day" timelines of the first two films.

In many ways, when John (who is basically only conceived and born because of nuclear tension) questions the Terminator (also only conceived and born because of nuclear tension) about why Russia would be attacked by Skynet, the Terminator can be seen as standing in for Reagan himself having to explain to a kid the dicey intricacies of alliances. Scenes like this highlight the delicate, unpredictable and unstable nature of American politics in general. Reagan's softening in rhetoric on Russia remains one of the ultimate examples of shifting alliances, and although this change in heart started in 1986, *Terminator 2* was still processing it five years later. In an exchange at the Kremlin in 1988 with reporters who were puzzled that Reagan was smiling with Russian leaders who he had previously claimed were part of an "Evil Empire," Reagan said: "That was another time, another era". In actuality, it was mere months prior to this press interaction that Reagan was referring to the "Evil Empire". Reagan and Gorbachev had numerous meetings before they signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in late 1987, which eliminated close to 2,700 missiles, with the two leaders eventually realizing that they both had their citizens' best interests in mind although they had different ideologies. Reagan remained hopeful that Russia would eventually embrace the tenets of democracy, but he interestingly co-opted an old Russian proverb at a press conference announcing the

Treaty which indicated in a playful manner that alliances are indeed a shaky proposition: "Trust, but verify". The fact that the sentient computer system is able to trick Russia into thinking that the United States is attacking them both highlights the flimsy nature of geopolitical relationships and simultaneously engenders sympathy for the United States, who becomes both a victim of bad technology and a foreign nation reverted to its original reprogramming. Although Schwarzenegger is not Russian, the film presenting a foreign piece of technology converted to a protective good machine indoctrinated by John into American culture complicates matters further.

Despite Sarah Connor's obsession with Armageddon, and the T-1000's deadpan destructiveness, *Terminator 2* is a far softer movie than *The Terminator*, working hard to talk about feelings amidst dangerous situations. John teaching the Terminator how to smile and Sarah Connor teaching herself how to become more physically tough visa vie advanced weapons training and intense workout regiments are just some of the moments in the film that reflect an altering of the hard body image as discussed by Jeffords. All of this helps to prove that masculinity and femininity are indeed societal constructs that are as malleable as the liquid-metal T-1000. However, a common shared humanity is what remains of the utmost importance and these constructs do sometimes interfere more than they help. For instance, in her initial protection mode she seems to try to be channeling her inner Kyle Reese but just as he did at numerous points in the first film, she loses sight of what makes humanity worth saving in the first place: their capacity for love and compassion. It is Sarah's warmth and soothing comfort that allows Kyle to reconnect with his inner humanity in the first film, but in this film it is her son that allows her to reconnect with her inner humanity— showing that love and compassion could and should

be practiced by everyone regardless of any societal constructs that might seem to indicate otherwise. In addition, the mission Kyle passes onto Sarah seems to give her purpose for the first time in her life. The events of the sequel indicate that the onus is on all members of humanity to realize the gifts that have been bestowed on them since all humans are born with the ability to emotionally connect and empathize with others, and they should act accordingly.

Sarah's son has turned out to be far less bloodthirsty than his machine-like mom, who comes to resemble the T-1000 in her simplicity of purpose at the beginning of the film. Upon rescuing his mother Sarah from the mental institution, Sarah scolds her son John and inadvertently makes him cry. After saying that he can't risk himself even for her, he says in a dejected tone that he just had to get her out of that place. Instead of apologizing and realizing why John took the risk, she stays steadfast and tells him he is too important, but the implication is that she is talking about his destiny to the human race rather than her personal relationship with him. The line between human and machine is crossed in this scene in a quite memorable way. After a beat, it is the Terminator that ultimately wonders what is wrong with John's eyes, able to compute that something is remiss but ultimately unable to empathize with him since he is a machine. Sarah's emotional distance in this scene indicates that the new Sarah Connor has not just been masculinized in terms of physical strength but also in terms of emotional dissonance: "She wears fatigues, totes heavy weapons, and has a mission to perform. As final proof of her new hard character, she even forgets to love her son" (Jeffords 160). Sarah mirrors a Terminator in this outfit, her mind set on a singular goal that must be achieved at all costs. Deep immersion into stereotypical male roles such as those encouraged by Reagan

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is still depicted as quite dangerous to the smooth functioning of a family, proving that Reagan's initial years of rhetoric and action cannot be easily erased on the collective psyche of America even after changes in policy and even years after he left office. Sarah has been so laser-focused on protecting her son and preparing him for his future mission that she has been desensitized and although technically deep down since she is human she is harboring deeply repressed feelings, she has disconnected so much that an emotionless machine has become more attuned to shifts in her son's demeanor than she currently is.

It isn't until she almost executes a man based off of something he hasn't done yet that she allows herself to get in touch with those deep-seated emotions, and once she realizes she is becoming more machine-like than anything she has fought, she falls to the floor and breaks down just as the Terminator and John arrive to stop her. She is so traumatized by her own descent down the slippery slope of justification in the name of the greater good of humanity that at first the only words she can get out are: "I almost… I almost," to which John replies: "It's okay, we will figure something out". This moment of her son reassuring her rehumanizes Sarah in multiple ways, giving her permission to get back in touch with her own humanity while simultaneously showing her that he does have the strength and ability necessary to figure out his place in the world, whether that be as a military leader or a Senator as a rejected alternate ending shows us. Sarah breaks down in tears and professes her love for her son for the first time in the film and she gives him the first genuine hug he has had in ages from her. Sarah's militant stance on motherhood softens, and her love for her son takes precedence over all else for the rest of the film.

The film cleverly meditates on the distinctions between human and cyborg actions, and, at times, the line is blurry, which says more about the free-willed humans than it does about programmed killers. The franchise is fascinated about the inhumane actions of human beings almost as much as the naturally inhumane actions of inhuman cyborgs. If it were not for our own inability to stay out of large-scale conflicts, we would not have needed to create computerized missile defense systems that would potentially turn against us. Ultimately, the computer defense system Skynet ends up both showing people how fickle alliances can be and how unnecessary intra-human conflict is by "forcing" people of all different countries to band together to survive. The scene featuring Sarah in a tense confrontation at gunpoint with Dyson, and Sarah's personality throughout most of the second film, is a good representation of what Cameron's second Terminator film offers as a post-Cold War answer to "momism," the term coined by Philip Wylie in 1942 in a book called *Generation of Vipers*, which argued that overprotective mothers were preventing men from being successful soldiers. Sarah has transformed into a completely different person from the clueless waitress she was depicted as in the beginning of the first film. She has been committed to an insane asylum for speaking the truth, and has used the time as preparation for future battles with cyborgs. The film is still conservative in that physical strength is aligned with masculinity, but it also is a great representation of just how flawed "momism" truly is. Sarah's training has led her to a develop fighting skills and a toned body but all of this means nothing without an ability to connect with the person she is trying to protect. A balance is offered where domestic security and traditional familial love exist in tandem and each needs the other to have purpose.

Although machines cannot have true character progressions due to their inability to emote, the T-800's learning journey due to having his switch flipped to "learning mode" can be called character development. Both the character development of Sarah Connor and that of the T-800 prove that societal standards of masculinity and femininity still need a lot of work. Perhaps no scene better illustrates this than the finale of the film where John pleads with the reprogrammed Terminator to stay with him but he refuses on the grounds that all traces of the machines must be eradicated in order to possibly prevent the AI computer Skynet's rise to power. Crying and ordering his friend to stay, the Terminator simply replies: "I know now why you cry, but it is something I can never do". He allows John to hug him, and more importantly accepts Sarah's hand when she extends it to silently thank him for everything. The ability of the emotionless male machine to now see why humans cry, coupled with his ultimate sacrifice, is a poignant representation of the possibility to begin healing from the kind of toxic masculinity that enabled the rise of the machines in the first place. Forest Pyle notes that the positive outcome of the second *Terminator* film is contingent upon the sacrifice of the T-800: humans and humanism will only prevail upon the cyborg becoming humanized: "The Schwarzenegger Terminator sacrifices himself in order to prevent the possibility that any prototypes or computer chips from this deadly technology would remain to provoke the catastrophe that has just been rescinded" (Pyle 240). Furthermore, and perhaps because of the fact that our warring nature unknowingly planted the seeds of our destruction within the *Terminator* mythos, this humanization of the cyborg would potentially (and hopefully) lead to humanity discovering the value of human life, as Sarah points out in her closing monologue.

Sarah's progression from earlier in the film indicates that what is even more important than the cyborg being humanized is humans reckoning with the "cyborg" within themselves. Equally important, then, to vigilance about enemies to American domesticity is vigilance about ourselves becoming too machine-like. The film shows how thoughtful engagement with our own humanity can and should be a prerequisite for equally thoughtful and meaningful interaction with technology which can help humans improve their lots in life. Innovators like Miles Dyson are necessary toward our economic and industrial development, and although the mistakes of the past such as reckless rhetoric and unchecked hubris can and do end up continuing to cause obstacles to positive growth, brave people like Dyson are shown to be needed in order to help "change the way it goes" as his wife points out before Dyson heads to the laboratory to destroy his research.

Terminator 2: Judgment Day takes earlier rhetoric (including Reagan's Evil Empire phrasing that harkened back to 1950s Communist paranoia) and reworks it to reflect a changing political climate. Paranoia certainly still factors in during this new political climate. Reagan's mantra of trust with verification is microcosmic of the overall 1980s ethos of human interaction: handshaking is more important than muscle flexing. In addition, Sarah's extension of her hand is a quiet but powerful image since it helps to perfectly bookend the endings of the two films: in the first film, the Terminator is reaching his hand out to strangle Sarah when she uses her free hand to crush it in the hydraulic press. Sarah effectively apologizes for her initial hostility to this reprogrammed machine, which shows that part of living in this society coping with the trauma of nuclear

possibility is forgiving certain people and situations that might not be able or even willing to hear the apology.

Terminator 2 is ultimately about people, whereas The Terminator is about machines. Earlier in the film, Sarah rails against Miles Dyson, as even though she has decided to not execute him in cold blood, she still has some unresolved anger issues: "Men like you built the atom bomb. Men like you thought it up," and it is young John that once again steps in as the voice of reason, telling his mother that she needs to try to be a bit more constructive. A good portion of the runtime of the film is indeed devoted to showing and talking about the negative contributions men in particular have brought forth upon society and the consequences of said contributions, and the Terminators of the film are the most concrete representations of what havoc can be wrought as a result. Even though the Terminator played by Schwarzenegger is helpful and even inspirational to the Connor clan, the fact that it exists in the first place is a constant reminder of the lasting impact of the whims of those in charge of the military industrial complex. The Connor family itself would've been impossible to be formed without the threat of Skynet constantly looming. Further still, it seems that reprogrammed Terminators are ironically the best ways to safeguard the interests of the human race, showing in a crystal clear way that emotion is a double-edged sword in terms of humanity: it can help us to connect with the people we love, but it can also cause the end of the world.

Terminator 2 tames Reagan's militarism more than Jeffords admits in her Hard Bodies thesis. The reconnection scene between Sarah and John is one of the best examples the film offers of the psychological damage that typical Reaganite "values" did to many people. Although the policies Reagan and his administration championed were

supposedly designed and implemented to help the average American nuclear family, and the parable of the Connors is a testament to that. For this reason, Jeffords' ultimate assessment of the film misses the mark: "Audiences can conclude that that the aggressive and destructive 1980s male body that became the target for both ridicule and hatred may not have been inherently "bad" but only, in some sociologically pitiful way, misunderstood, just like the Reagan policy of SDI and increased military armaments" (Jeffords 173). While the film certainly reflects new notions of masculinity and refined geopolitical thinking, it does not imply that Reagan's dangerous rhetoric was in any way benign and only spoken for the good of America. The original lethal T-800 and the T-1000 would never have existed in the first place if it were not for the out-of-control nationalism and hubris of American leaders. If anything, Americans should just breathe a sigh of relief that Sarah Connor is even allowed to reconcile with the reprogrammed Terminator, since this reflects the fact that Reagan had a change of heart. While the deeply traumatic events Connor has endured has given her a son, it has also given her a ruptured post-nuclear family and a lifetime of psychological scars. None of that would have been possible without the deeply problematic political landscape that thought up Skynet in the first place, and since the fictionalized landscape of the Connors' world mirrors that of the real world, Jeffords' reading does not account for that. Jeffords' overall analysis of the film as a representation of shifting concepts of masculinity and what that means for the sociopolitical and sociological landscape of America is quite potent. The film does imply that weapons and aggressive action are sometimes necessary, but only as an extreme means of defense, and what is more important is a maintained

sense of vigilance about how humanity is fragile and people of all nations and walks of life must learn how to live peacefully in order to survive as a species.

Despite its apocalyptic undertones, *Terminator 2* does not give up on machines or people: Sarah's final monologue is poignant and thought-provoking as well as being cautiously optimistic: "If a machine, a Terminator, can learn the value of human life… maybe we can too". Immediately following this final observation, the ominous and daunting *Terminator* theme kicks in and the credits roll. While the theme song is an important reminder of why these movies exist in the first place, the hopeful tone Sarah's message shows that humanity is not necessarily destined to end up bringing her earlier nightmares to fruition.

Interestingly, an alternate coda to the story was filmed but ultimately it was decided to use this monologue accompanied by the image of a road being traveled at night to bring the film to its conclusion. Originally, the end scene showed older Sarah along with Senator John Connor and his young daughter having fun in a playground in the year 2029. This ending would've made it clear that Judgment Day had been averted for good and hinted at the fact that John and his colleagues were able to avoid Judgment Day from happening by using "common sense" to guide their decisions. Cameron changed the ending at the suggestion of a fellow producer on the films, who told him it was best to keep the story open-ended in case he ever wanted to revisit it down the line. Whether it was just for this reason or not, the ending Cameron ended up choosing was fitting for the tone of this franchise: a tone of uncertainty and trepidation, which allowed for the prospect of hope to be balanced out by an equally important sense of vigilance

that the citizens of the world should always have in terms of sociopolitical and geopolitical issues.

By the time *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* was released, Russia and the US had allied against Iraq in the Gulf War and the Cold War had been declared over for about two years. As a result, the film reverses many realities that the first film had presented. President Ronald Reagan commented on the change in the real world political climate: in May 1988, following more fruitful relations with the Soviet Union, Reagan met with reformist General Secretary of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev. When asked by a reporter if he still thought he was in an Evil Empire. Seeming to invoke a Star Wars film (consciously or not), Reagan responded by saying: "That was another time, another era." The truth, of course, was that the span of time in between Reagan's last negative remark about the USSR and this moment in May of 1988 was not as long as Reagan made it seem. By 1988, Gorbachev had allowed a new relationship to develop between the US and USSR and the threat of nuclear war had dissipated greatly. Despite the improved relationship, this served as further proof of the nature of geopolitical instability. If even the human characters of the film cannot keep track of what other humans are on their side, it is impossible to expect the machines to want to sort this out. Their decision to view all of humanity as a threat in a microsecond is both logical and practical.

The hard-bodied heroes of 1980s films, many of which were played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, were far less sentimental than the reprogrammed T-800 of *Terminator 2*. For Susan Jeffords, these hard bodies were emblematic of the machismo Reagan advocated for in terms of defense: "For Ronald Reagan, the best 'weapon' to use against the Soviet Union is not then a tank or a nuclear bomb but the 'free' American mind inside

a hard body". Essentially, nuclear weapons were viewed as the ultimate safeguard against American decimation, but in order to prevent bombs from launching, tough guys with guns and an indestructible attitude of American hegemony were of the utmost importance. Despite the nuclear cool down between two superpowers, the hard body is still on full display in the early nineties. Schwarzenegger's character may learn about love and the importance of life versus death while becoming a loveable children's toy to John, but his goals are still accomplished visa vie an imposing posture, loaded guns and his character is literally incapable of crying. He is a model microcosm of the type of man the Bush era promoted: less of a provoker than his character was in the eighties, but still able to fight when necessary. Although the film's characters are successful in averting nuclear disaster, they can only do this visa vie explosions, shootouts (even if they yield zero casualties), and destructive highway chases. Perhaps the dichotomy between Schwarzenegger's original Terminator character and reprogrammed Terminator then becomes the ultimate allegory for Reagan and Bush: whether in terminating or protecting mode, the Terminator is always vigilant, ready for conflict and a force to be reckoned with. The best possible recourse is to come across as congenial and approach situations as diplomatically as possible but always having your guns loaded just in case. Crucially, the movie flirts with the boundaries between the Terminator of 1984 and the Terminator of 1991 as much as possible to satisfy action junkies while simultaneously speaking to the only slightly evolving political climate.

As sentimental as *Terminator 2* is, the franchise keeps selling the threat of destruction, repacking it in different forms, such as an even more lethal version of the T-1000, a Terminatrix called the T-X in *Terminator 3*, and our T-800, like Reagan in

historical hindsight, just becomes more loveable. Within the *Terminator* mythos, all victories are somewhat hollow and potentially reversible because the genie has already come out of the bottle. The genie is not so much the technology behind the titular machines of the series as it is the inventors of the objects of our destruction. The films are concerned about both human and nonhuman advances in warfare. The franchise of the *Terminator* lends itself also to meditation on if any advances in warfare can truly be considered "human"—hence the significance of the Terminators appearing so human. Advances enabled humans to create "smarter" bombs, weapons, and technology. The franchise intimates that it is only a matter of time before the devices we create to defend us end up overpowering us. The final sacrifice of the T-800 in the molten steel can be seen as both a redemption of the original Terminator as well as a redemption for President Reagan himself. The T-800 has spent the whole runtime of this film protecting the Connors from dangers, but it knows the ultimate way to keep them out of danger is by being lowered into the steel. Sarah's handshake with the T-800 before pressing a button that will once again allow her to kill a T-800, but this time in a melancholy way, symbolizes a sense of trust and respect. The "thumbs up" given by the T-800 as he disappears into the steel reassures audiences that this was the right thing to do, but it is bittersweet nonetheless. Although a majority of the danger the Connors are put through throughout the first two films are a byproduct of careless technological and nuclear developments ala Reagan's early years, it is clear that the intent was always to protect American families even though the unspoken truth is that this endangered foreign lives. Nevertheless, the moments of good and responsible technological use depicted in the films along with Sarah's final monologue implies that humanity will never be able to

fully resist the allure of technological progress, despite the potential inherent risks it will

always pose.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Riding the Movies

In my final chapter, I address the commercial underbelly of the entire Reagan era blockbuster film by examining the urge of Disney and Universal to turn these films into theme park "rides." Traditional theme parks like Six Flags have rollercoasters with simple themes like Batman, a clear commercial tie-in to the films but quite distinct from them. Disney and Universal, however, have upped the ante to create entirely simulated "rides" which may indeed have roller coaster-like elements, but now primarily feature "virtual" rides where audiences experience a film-like "ride" without moving at all. The "rides" feature extensive video reworking of the films, both before and during the "rides" with theme park personnel sometimes also acting the parts of film characters. Drawing from the work of Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco, I argue that these rides create a "double" nostalgia, or a sort of hall of mirrors where the ride mirrors the nostalgia for the film and vice versa. If the blockbuster film of the Reaganite 1980s really marketed the political and commercial fantasies of their age, these rides have reduced the entire blockbuster experience to its most basic form: a ride.

Theme parks such as the world's most famous ones owned by Disney and Universal are fundamentally malls with rides and rely heavily on branding to attract their consumer base and to keep them spending as much money as possible throughout their stays. For instance, Starbucks products are featured prominently on Main Street's Bakery in the Magic Kingdom in Florida and a Margaritaville restaurant located strategically in between the two theme parks that make up the Florida Universal resort. Interestingly, Main Street's concept in general is to transport park guests to a bygone era that most of

them have never even experienced in real life. The ambience is supposed to evoke Walt

Disney's Missouri hometown circa 1910 but the juxtaposition between that and the ultra-

modern prices is quite jarring both ideologically and certainly financially. The main

unstated force that keeps theme parks such as those of the Walt Disney Company and

Universal is essentially what I will call "doubled nostalgia," manufactured nostalgia that

can ultimately only be experienced authentically on the terms of the companies and in

their parks.

Nostalgic feelings are evoked in idealized environments in order to make people

only feel truly comfortable and happy within these worlds of illusion, allowing for theme

parks to be ultra profitable. Renowned French philosopher Jean Baudrillard is critical to

the discussion here: his insightful analysis of the Disney parks and those who attend them

were first published in 1981 in *Simulacra and Simulation* but remain relevant to this day.

He argued that Disneyland offered family-oriented narratives which were meant to mirror

traditional American values such as hard work and immersion into consumer culture.

Parkgoers suspend disbelief in their interactions and experiences with the characters and

scenarios presented which are meant to be fantastical and representative of everything the

real world is not. In actuality, the values and messages the rides and entertainment of the

theme parks perpetuate fairly accurately reflects the ideology of America in general. This

ideological reflection proves Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, which by its very

definition is "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard 1).

Commodities do not have use-value but can rather be understood as signs and involves

creating a set of signifiers for a reality that does not even exist. As Baudrillard states,

"What every society looks for in continuing to produce, and to overproduce, is to restore

the real that escapes it. That is why today this 'material' production is that of the hyperreal itself" (Baudrillard 23). American capitalist society is deeply contingent on unrealistic expectations for wide swaths of people, and this is part of the reason theme parks are so successful. They allow anyone who can afford a ticket to convince themselves that the successes and fulfilled dreams of the characters in the rides and attractions are feasible to them as well, even though in many cases "real life" is not that easy. The film-rides at Disney and Universal parks don't just offer nostalgia for a time, such as the 1980s, but a desire to experience an idealized version of the decade, a nostalgia for the possibility of nostalgia. Since Reagan himself often turned to the unrealistic, wish fulfillment narratives of film to push his ideological agendas, theme parks are the ultimate site of indoctrination under the guise of fun and escape.

The aim of the game for theme park executives is not much different from that of the producers of popular American movies: ideological indoctrination. In other words, the same commercial desire for film that Siegfried Kracauer proposed in the essay "The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies" today might be called "The Little Shopgirls Go to Disneyland". Disney and Universal park and ride designers, especially, are adept at toying with the emotions of their parkgoers and they are quite good at manipulating people into going on repeat trips throughout the various eras of peoples' lives to cash in on the nostalgia traps they subtly and not-so-subtly set throughout each visit. Disney offers "memory maker" photo packages, for example, which serves two purposes: one is to cash in immediately on peoples' inherent desire to remember the fun times in their lives and one is to plant the seeds in their heads that a return trip should be inevitable. The parks do have a significant turnover in the names and concepts of attractions, but

certain staples seem to always remain and when changes are announced to the landscape of the parks, diehard fans tend to be quite vocal in their outrage at the company for allowing such changes.

The fervor of theme park enthusiasts speaks to the good job the companies do in terms of baiting customers with nostalgia traps. The parks have always consisted of a combination of attractions that transport guests into pure fantasy worlds (typically worlds originally depicted in Disney's own animated films) and ones which approximate "real" locales, cultures and traditions around the world (but mostly America or Europe). Of course, Disney's approximations cannot feasibly reflect reality because of spatial limits but they also take great pains to avoid depicting any less than ideal elements of these locales. Italian philosopher Umberto Eco furthered Baudrillard's analysis of Disney in his *Travels in Hyperreality*, an exploration of America's often competing realities of regular reality and hyperreality. He argues that our predilection toward perfect copies and absolute fakes accustoms us to the illusory usefulness of consumer goods and political ideologies. According to Eco, "There is a constant in the average American imagination and taste, for which the past must be preserved and celebrated in full-scale authentic copy, a philosophy of immortality as duplication. It dominates the relation with the self, with the past, not infrequently with the present, always with History, and, even, with the European tradition" (Eco 6). These copies project the illusion that the past was perfect, and that immersion in modern technology and consumerism with reverence for this past is the key to further innovation and preservation of American values. This type of collective societal selective memory is critical for nostalgia traps to be effective both at

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Disney World and in the "real world" in general. Nostalgia itself is a trap, and this manipulative emotional fuel is what the major theme parks run on.

This nostalgia is insidious because people naturally can generally only recall so many events and moments of their lives, and vacation destinations are able to take advantage of this fact through various ways including their advertising, the photo and video packages offered and more. Furthermore, the very design and layout of the parks is intricately set up to be as aesthetically pleasing as possible in order to evoke as many nostalgic feelings as possible. Indeed, the concept of nostalgia itself is contingent on peoples' conveniently limited memories. For this reason, the ultimate version of nostalgia can be felt on a theme park ride at Disney or Universal as one sits in a vehicle that carefully pivots the individual to carefully constructed illusions, and this ride exists as a part of a place that is devoted to worshipping the convenient memory of America. This is where the border between reality and fiction gets increasingly blurred, which is the heart of this chapters' argument.

There is a significant neurological element to nostalgia: the human brains' limitations in terms of memory and data processing. Many studies have been done on the concept of flashbulb memories, but some of the most famous studies on the phenomenon focused on the 1986 Challenger explosion, which ironically for the purposes of this dissertation occurred during Reagan's second term. Overall, most of these studies found that over time, peoples' memories of the event became increasingly inaccurate and unreliable but interestingly, peoples' confidence in their recall of the event remained high. Perhaps this speaks to the ethos that Reagan ushered in and encouraged, one of confidence in nostalgia, and it additionally just speaks to the reality of human fallibility:

"Everybody remembers thousands of things that really did happen: one's happy weekend with X, one's terrible dispute with Y, one's success in achieving Z. Such recollections are repeatedly confirmed, not only by nostalgic conversations (perhaps with X) but by one's present unpleasant relations with Y, by a life situation that reflects accomplishment of Z" (Neisser and Harsch, 10). Of course, it is impossible for most human beings to recall every single experience which has ever happened to them, but this study makes it clear that repetition and conversation with others is critical to long-term recollection of events and importantly, even this does not mean the recollection is accurate. To speak to how this relates to theme parks and nostalgia in particular, it is helpful to turn to theorists who have discussed the correlation of nostalgia and popular culture. Professor of Visual Arts Christine Sprengler explores the history of nostalgia in contemporary American film, which is also applicable to theme parks since so many theme park rides rely on elements of film, and even find their source material in films as will be explored throughout this chapter: "Questions surface about how much time must elapse between the initial experience of an object or event and the moment it activates a nostalgic response. In fashion and music, a few decades were thought to suffice, while in politics the passing of a single term might warrant an expression of longing for the 'good old days'" (Sprengler 28). The further back an era or event in history is, the more liberties can be taken since nostalgia gets even more ideologically effective with the passage of time since a majority of people, vacationers especially, will buy almost anything you tell them about the distant past. Most of the lands at Disney Parks are themed around "classic" Disney films, frontier days, swashbuckling adventures such as those of Indiana Jones, a character who is himself a composite of stock characters from 1940s adventure films. Perhaps the best

example of just how diluted and foggy history can be filtered through a lens of nostalgia is the perennial classic ride Pirates of the Caribbean, which presents pirates as fun-loving, singing jokesters who are mainly interested in camaraderie and rum. This contrasts starkly with the uncomfortable realities of what actual pirates did in the name of procuring treasure such as rape, pillaging and murder. Nostalgia is a balm for the uncomfortable realities of life, in general, and theme parks offer the perfect opportunity to seemingly escape said realities, all the while perpetuating the main uncomfortable reality of capitalist life: the economic and psychological cost of this life.

Although certainly not limited to theme parks, Disney and Universal have always been uniquely poised to tap into the potential of economically weaponizing these facts of human existence by virtue of their clout as titans of the entertainment industry. As previous chapters have discussed, the movie industry employs similar tactics to turn in profits on their films, by presenting audiences with relatable characters that are able to cash in on the promises of the American dream in a way that most audience members cannot. Theme parks can convince their customers even more of the value of nostalgia by immersing people in ideal environments including the worlds of their most famous intellectual properties.

Just as Reagan condensed and simplified something as geopolitically tumultuous events as the Iranian hostage situation (joked about, tellingly, in *Back to the Future Part II*), the double nostalgia evoked at these theme parks is a surface level façade whose primary referent is itself, rather than some sort of actual world away from the park's world. Perhaps this is because our tendency toward these facades has reduced us to a

society incapable of self-reflection, because there is nothing behind the proverbial curtain, as Frederic Jameson alludes to in his essential study of postmodernism:

> Faced with these ultimate objects- our social, historical, and existential present, and the past as "referent"- the incompatibility of a postmodernist "nostalgia" art language with genuine historicity becomes dramatically apparent. The contradiction propels this mode, however, into complex and interesting new formal inventiveness; it being understood that the nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned "representation" of historical content, but instead approached the "past" through stylistic connotation, conveying "pastness" by the glossy qualities of the image, and "1930s-ness" or "1950s-ness" by the attributes of fashion (in that following the prescription of the Barthes of Mythologies, who saw connotation as the purveying of imaginary and stereotypical idealities: "Sinite," for example, as some Disney-EPCOT "concept" of China). (Jameson, 19)

Jameson's insight that nostalgia films evoke the past through "style" rather than through substance clearly explains the mechanism of the film-theme park ride connection. Rides and attractions are able to fit this mold even better than films since they are necessarily much shorter and as a result, more of an emphasis will be put on spectacular images, special effects and intellectual property branding over in-depth thematic analysis. This is ideologically convenient for theme park executives since many of the films that attractions are based off contain themes such as hyper-consumerism and nuclear war which are not palatable for places people go to in order to ostensibly "escape reality". It would especially be dicey for the rides to engage too much with the theme of hyper-

consumerism, since this would risk the destabilizing of the illusion that powers the theme park industry. Reaganite ideology no doubt influenced, whether consciously or unconsciously, the direction of Disney and Universal Parks for decades to come. Of course, all of the success and cultural clout of these companies cannot be attributed to Reagan's Presidency, especially since many of the companies' theme parks launched while Reagan was still no more than a professional working actor. Still, many of the most beloved deeply immersive movie-themed rides and attractions debuted while Reagan was still in office or shortly thereafter. As I will argue about *Back to the Future: the Ride* concept of "images" is of crucial importance to both the success of the most commercially successful theme parks and that of Presidents, and no President better exemplified this than President Ronald Reagan, a former actor who turned to politics later in his career. Just as is the case with many popular films as discussed in previous chapters, Reagan's speeches and policies often ignored any societal issues and chose to hone in on how model citizens of the 1980s would look to the past for inspiration. The theme parks explored in this chapter essentially did and continue to do the same thing: offer unrealistic models of living through nostalgia in order to convince people that such values are sustainable in a tangible way for most of America.

Disney cashes in on the lore of old time America, such as building fake "places" like Liberty Square, New Orleans Square and Main Street, USA, and the design of the parks creates the illusion that life can be perfect, and it is presented as so there. It does so by first trying to convince parkgoers that the past was perfect, as harsher realities of years past are ignored in favor of focusing on the greatness of the old days: and interestingly, almost all of the things showcased are consumerist in nature: movie theaters, ice cream

parlors, hot dog stands, storefronts, and the like. Meandering down Main Street will eventually lead you to a crossroads which allows you to choose your own adventure and you decide which land you will visit first: Adventureland, Frontierland, Liberty Square, Fantasy Land or Tomorrowland.

For the purposes of this chapter, I'd like to focus in on one particular attraction in Tomorrowland that perhaps best sums up the ideals of the consumerist family that the Disney corporation has always endorsed: the Carousel of Progress. Ironically, although the attraction is located in Tomorrowland, the attraction largely talks about the idealized past, indicating that all roads of the past, present and future should lead toward healthy engagement with consumerism. A revolutionary ride at the time it first premiered, the Carousel of Progress is a prototypical example of how rides at Disney are fundamentally unique compared to traditional amusement park rides. Rides at Disney tell stories, usually shortened versions of their most popular films but also often fall under the category of "infotainment" rides: ones which tell stories using stock type characters which often serve as parables for better, idyllic living through capitalism. Whereas all of the thrill factor of traditional amusement park rides is felt through literal, visceral motion, a good portion of the thrill of the rides at Disney World is contingent on manipulative emotion vis a vis ideologically biased storytelling.

In regards to the Carousel of Progress in particular, the ride is housed in a giant rotating theater and each time the theater rotates, a new time period is depicted. It appears to be the same family depicted in each time period although the characters never seem to age. The attraction is notable for being one of the first to feature Audio-Animatronics, lifelike figures of people and animals that have synchronized movement and sound. The

current time periods depicted are the Turn of the Century (1900s), the 1920s, the 1940s and then jumps to modern day. The ride has had a few different iterations over the years, with the main changes coming in the form of the last act since so many technological advances have been made since the premiere of the ride in the 1960s. Each act features a family engaging with the technological marvels of their respective time periods, and each family seems to greatly benefit from these products in terms of their relationships with one another and even their relationships with their neighbors, colleagues and significant others.

The Carousel of Progress first premiered at the World's Fair in 1964, and was the brainchild of Walt Disney himself. Initially sponsored solely by General Electric, the purpose of the ride was to get people to buy General Electric products at the World's Fair. Once it moved to Disneyland, the sponsorship remained for quite some time in the hopes that guests would go home and buy products from the company. Even after the sponsorship ended though, the ride remained partly because it was so beloved by park guests. This speaks to Disney Imagineer's gift of being able to make even sales pitches entertaining. This gift would ensure that consumerism could continue as a form of empty religion for the masses for quite some time. German philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote extensively on how capitalism itself is a form of a cultic religion that demands nothing less than complete devotion: "There is no day that is not a feast day, in the terrible sense that all its sacred pomp is unfolded before us; each day commands the utter fealty of each worshipper" (Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol. 1 288). This devotion is a complete trap, forcing the working class to toil away endlessly for the betterment of the upper stratum of society, all the while convincing the masses that this is a good and productive way to live.

With the sponsorship of General Electric, the ride was the perfect representation of the insidious nature of capitalism--- making the peddling of products designed to make life convenient for American nuclear families entertaining. Also, even without official sponsorship, it would behoove Disney to keep a ride like this because it reinforces the peoples' dependence on consumerism. All of the progress featured throughout the ride is contingent on consumerism--- and the happiness of the family as well is steeped in this dependency.

The implication becomes that without these consumer products, the family would basically have nothing else to do. In fact, they are so insignificant in and of themselves that the family is not even given a last name. The only names that really matter are those of the innovators who have made life easier for the family. In the 1920s scene, appliances literally come to life in this attraction as the father character of the attraction, John remarks: "Mr. Edison sure added life to our home". The family members depicted here (standing in as proxies for the consumers watching the Audio-Animatronics lead by example in the audience) exist to be consumers, to marvel at the glorious inventions at their fingertips, and not much more. There are a few moments scattered throughout where the characters joke around with each other about relationships or health ailments, but by and large their interactions with one another center around the notion of progress through innovative consumerist inventions. These interactions are perhaps most effective when they are effortlessly woven into the conversation, such as when John remarks that his daughter's date is taking her to a Valentine's dance on a horseless trolley. For the most part, even when non-consumer centric conversation is taking place, consumerism seeps in

somehow. While it is true that almost all-American life is inextricably linked to capitalism, scenes like this proves capitalism's true pervasiveness.

The ride is run on a literal circuitous loop practically the whole day every single day at Disney World. The design of the ride has practical purpose as well as storytelling purpose: it allows for new guests to be loaded onto the ride every five minutes which ensures that the ride never has too long of wait time, which is how long it takes the family in each era the ride presents to extol the virtues of Edison's latest inventions. In terms of the storytelling element, this design drives home to riders that consumerism is necessary and inescapable in every era. When the ride premiered, all but one of the eras featured were bygone eras which is what made many of the jokes funny: they had insight which the characters didn't so when John would say "life can't get any better than this" or anything of the sort, they already knew that it could and it would as soon as the theater would start rotating again. The ride's goal ostensibly is to show riders how lucky they are to have profited off of all these great inventors and inventions, and how they all do not exist in a vacuum but rather exist because of what came before them. A more subtle but nevertheless crucial subtext the ride possesses is that consumerism is what allows families to tap into the best versions of themselves and is the main source which affords them comfort and happiness.

Even if the Audio-Animatronic characters weren't pitching all of the consumer innovations of recent history, the ride itself is a feat of technology, engineering, and consumer potential, and the ultimate symbol of the cyclical, inescapable nature of technological and capitalistic progress. The role of the Audio-Animatronics which stand in for real people is to be in awe of the advances that make their lives as they know them

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possible. The role of the real people sitting in the audience is to take all of this in and believe that they should be equally blessed when thinking about their lives outside of the parks, and the role of the ride attendants is to keep the illusion running on a circuitous loop. Through spectacle and storytelling, Disney creates an illusion for guests that the world of consumption they inhabit on a daily basis is completely helpful and innocuous. The ride attendants outside helping to load, unload and rotate the theater every few minutes are contractually obligated by Disney to be cheerful and to live up to the title of "Cast Member" as opposed to a mere ride attendant. They are essentially paid to be minimum wage actors, which speaks to the never-ending cycle of capitalist consumerism that Disney perpetuates and exemplifies.

Theme parks are ostensibly designed to offer escape from the banality and problems of everyday life but many of their attractions reinforce capitalist ideology. At places like Disney and Universal, guests who feel trapped and suffocated by the trials of workaday life choose to buy into a world of illusion and distraction even though many of them know that these mega corporations that help perpetuate and promulgate the tenets of capitalism. The implication becomes that guests do not believe it is possible for real change to occur in their everyday lives so their only choice is to latch onto a false temporarily immersive narrative that magic exists and dreams come true while on vacation because real life will never be that rewarding. Simultaneously, the irony becomes that consumers at theme parks are indoctrinated to believe that they can only fully reap the benefits of hard work by going on vacation as often as possible. However, even once on vacation at a Disney theme park, they are still subject to rides like this which promote the benefits of everyday consumption, and these rides are operated by

underpaid staffers whose job it is to distract and immerse people so that guests will keep paying to keep the illusion alive.

Most of the rides and attractions are based off larger-than-life blockbuster movies for precisely this reason, and most of the characters featured in them are glamorized and depicted as superheroes, princesses, renegade rebels or conforming to a similar archetype. The Carousel of Progress is different in that respect since it is abundantly clear that John's family is meant to represent an ordinary family. In a way, this approach is more insidious on behalf of the creators and exhibitors of this ride: "The association of the family unit with consumption provides a powerful image. It connects the purchase of the sponsors' products with the family which is the context within which products at the theme park will be consumed- in the merchandise shops, restaurants, and so on" (Bryman 69). What is being concentrated on is not a galaxy far away or being thrust into the middle of a conflict involving a familiar intellectual property, but rather a snapshot of how real-world, concrete consumer products can be used to benefit a family unit. The effortless connections the ride makes between normal family conversations and consumerist behavior offers a brilliant case for the installation of General Electric products in order to not just power the homes of American families but also to power them in general.

The characters of the Carousel of Progress are deliberately designed to be as charming and disarming. Audiences are meant to immediately ingratiate themselves with these families as they are slowly rotated from one set piece to another every few minutes. The folksy humor, the catchy songs and the effervescent personalities of the characters distract from the fact that the lions' share of their interactions with one another are as

robotic as the animatronics themselves. True connection and happiness can never be purchased, but for the sake of Disney and General Electric, the storytelling of this quaint attraction had to imply that it could be. The Audio Animatronics featured throughout the major theme parks, specifically Disney Parks, function as idealized versions of human beings interacting with idealized versions of American values, ideals and inventions. In fact, at the same time that the Carousel of Progress was unveiled at the New York World's Fair, an attraction called *Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln* which would eventually be ported over to Disneyland featured the first Audio Animatronic President. The show has always featured a voice actor re-enacting several snippets of Lincoln's best remembered speeches but its current iteration has added a presentation of the President's various accomplishments in his autobiography. The success of the show led Disney's Imagineers to create a more extensive theater show featuring all of the Presidents of the United States, all given the same Animatronic treatment Lincoln received. All of these figures, both representing "average citizens" and Presidents, are meant to inspire park guests to strive to be the best versions of themselves they possibly can be in order to fulfill their role as ideal American citizens.

Umberto Eco explains that the Animatronics reflected all of Walt Disney's hopes and dreams regarding the mission of Disney Parks: the technique "represented a great source of pride for Walt Disney, who had finally managed to achieve his own dream and reconstruct a fantasy world more real than reality, breaking down the wall of the second dimension, creating not a movie, which is illusion, but total theater" (Eco 42). Like Reagan, Walt Disney himself sprang from extremely humble origins, rising in social class due to his success in animation which eventually enabled him to spearhead his own

company and expand his empire to include television and theme parks. Disney claimed that he only opened Disneyland because he was seeking an environment that the parents could have as much fun as the children, and this included himself since he was becoming quite bored of taking his daughter to amusement parks that were not amusing to him. Disney's endorsement of American capitalistic life through the movies, rides and attractions he had a hand in developing doubtless had something to do with the fact that the system ultimately ended up serving him, and perhaps he truly felt that the opportunities that opened up for him were possible for everyone. Still, the ability for a small group of individuals, whether they be Presidents or company executives, to have such a powerful influence over the direction of what a country values and holds dear is disconcerting and should not be ignored.

Universal's success as a theme park titan hinges largely on its storied history of being a powerhouse in the movie industry. While Disneyland originally featured several rides based off of its catalog of movies, and Disney Parks the world over still do in addition to having incorporated treasured Intellectual Properties such as *Star Wars* and *Avatar*, Universal has predominantly featured rides and attractions that are based off of popular movie franchises and the goal is to immerse film fans and thrill-seekers alike into the cinematic worlds of these franchises. While the movies relied and continue to rely on filmgoers being emotionally moved by the plight of their heroes onscreen, the rides and interactive shows try to literally and figuratively move the fans. Nowhere is this clearer than on Universal's Hollywood studio tour. As you move through different sets and recreations of sets of different Hollywood movies, you are meant to feel like a VIP with exclusive access to these sets and backlot secrets. In actuality, though, the tour guides all

have the same scripts and are allowed to improvise very little so most tours will end up yielding the exact same information. In addition, you ride through a couple mini rides that immerse you into the worlds of the characters that are projected in the mini rides. Currently, these characters include key players in the *Fast and Furious* films and *King Kong*. The tour both relies on typical movie ride formula and the pseudo-VIP treatment in order to make it seem like a one-of-a-kind experience for each individual rider. For an additional price, one can get the ultimate VIP experience which elongates the standard Hollywood backlot tour usually passing through many more film sets and even taking guests through certain sets that might be getting ready for film shoots that non-VIP riders would not be privy to on that particular day. By being granted access to the places where some of their favorite movies and shows might have been filmed, Universal Park goers are entitled to bragging rights that others will not be able to procure unless they shell out the dough for the same treatment. Word of mouth becomes one of the best marketing tools for this particular treatment since Universal doesn't usually tout it in their advertisements. At the end of the day, however, guests are nothing more than Very Important Consumers, there to be ideologically brainwashed into uniform thought about the value of consumption in their lives.

Universal has been using the tagline "Ride the Movies" since the gates of its Florida theme park opened in 1990. At that time, the tagline was fairly apropos as an opening day ride (which remains open to this day) was a ride called *E.T. Adventure*, which transports riders to the titular aliens' planet where they are sent along with E.T. in order to renew life on E.T.'s Green Planet. This particular ride does not feature too much of a focus on consumerism, save for the American-made bikes that act as the catalyst for

saving life on E.T.'s planet. Overall, however, this ride is just meant to showcase E.T.'s home planet and introduce some of his friends. Another ride based off of a Spielberg classic that was not an opening day ride but does remain open as of this writing in 2024, is *Jurassic Park: The Ride*. This ride is also fairly light in its story, focusing instead on depicting an array of dinosaurs from the film. The 1993 blockbuster Jurassic Park centers on an eccentric rich industrialist named John Hammond inviting several scientists to a theme park which features cloned dinosaurs, in the hopes that they will sign off on a safety certification check for the Park. Hammond's investors have forced him to get this safety certification after a Velociraptor kills a dinosaur handler. A deliberate sabotage plot from one of Hammond's workers causes several dinosaurs to break loose from their confines and this puts Hammond, his grandchildren and the scientists he has invited to the Park in jeopardy. Ultimately, they all escape the clutches of the dinosaurs and leave the Park by helicopter, all convinced of the dangers of bringing prehistoric creatures back to life. Seeming to ignore the events of the movie, the attraction based off of the film is housed in a section of Universal called Jurassic Park, and pre-show videos featuring Jurassic Park's CEO John Hammond imply that this ride indicates that Jurassic Park actually opened in accordance with Hammond's wishes. Chaos still finds a way into the fray, however, when a T-Rex escapes its paddock and chases the riders who ultimately avoid it by careening down a hill. Ironically and ultimately appropriately, the original *Jurassic Park* ride at Universal ignored the lessons of the first film in order to allow riders to experience the fear and thrill of being pursued by a dinosaur. Certainly, as noted elsewhere in this chapter, no ride can engage effectively with all of the themes of the film it is based off, but the fact that no attempt was made here is telling. The fact that the ride

encourages staring at Animatronics representing the cloned dinosaurs with a simultaneous sense of reverence and fear over a concrete storyline is perhaps the best example of how unquestioning consumerism can be dangerous. In a world where even prehistoric creatures can be commodified, perhaps that should be considered a bridge too far. The latest addition to the *Jurassic* offerings at Universal, the Velocicoaster, does contain a pre-show that grapples with some of the ramifications of commodifying dinosaurs for the first time since the 1993 movie.

In the new *Jurassic World* ride, protagonist Owen Grady's conscience becomes the surrogate for ours. His belief that mining precious creatures for the profit of a corporation stands in for Universal's ability to manipulate people into being ideal consumers for their products especially at their theme parks. In the *Jurassic World* series of movies, Owen Grady (Chris Pratt) is an ethologist who has been training Velociraptors and studying their intelligence. Grady is brought to assess the safety of Jurassic World just as the scientists in *Jurassic Park* were brought there to do. Grady butts heads often with operations manager Claire Dearing, who views the dinosaurs as mere assets and does not feel like she has time for anything other than work. Throughout the course of the first movie, Owen convinces Claire that most of these dinosaurs are actually intelligent and empathetic, while simultaneously eventually persuading her that some of them are quite dangerous. Claire and Owen join forces to rescue Claire's visiting niece and nephew from the dangerous dinosaurs, specifically the newly engineered Indominus Rex. For some unknown reason, Claire is once again presented in the pre-show of this ride as an irresponsible businesswoman more focused on giving the public what they want as

opposed to thinking about the repercussions. Claire discusses how the company is committed to giving riders what they want: "more teeth".

Already based off a franchise that is quite meta in nature, this ride is even more meta since from a storytelling perspective he is talking to Jurassic World park guests but in actuality, he is talking to Universal customers. The question then emerges if there is any difference at all between the types of guests that are shown to frequent Jurassic World and those who call Universal a second home: perhaps they too crave more teeth at all costs, because that is all they have ever been conditioned to want. They crave to fill a void that they do not know, or cannot bring themselves to accept, will never truly be filled as long as they align themselves with the ethos of those offering them more teeth in lieu of anything that will satiate their souls. There are many knowing winks throughout the pre-show video that indicates both a symbiotic relationship between Universal executives and fans as well as the express understanding that Universal knows that their fans know what they're up to, and this pre-show video is one of the ways the company lets us know this in no uncertain terms.

If we are trapped in this capitalistic system where the rich get richer and the poorer need theme parks to try to escape reality, consumers may as well be able to have fun while doing so and somehow hearing from the company keeping the illusions alive that they know that the consumers know the truth deep down is comforting in a way. No franchise better illustrates this conceit than *Jurassic Park*. It represents consumerism at its most ironic level, and as mentioned before gets even more meta with the addition of a literal section at many Universal parks dubbed Jurassic Park. This ride contains perhaps the biggest indictment of consumerism for consumerism's sake since the 1993 film.

Owen Grady is emphatically opposed to his on-again-off-again girlfriend Clare's (Bryce Dallas Howard) plan to continue work on the Jurassic project after the events of *Jurassic World*. He goes as far as alternatively warning and blasting future riders and implying that going on the ride is ethically wrong. By the end of the pre show video, defeated, he throws his hands up in the air and says that he hopes guests still have some fingers and toes left before they reach the gift shop. The dinosaurs stand in for American consumers in general, who are always hungry for more. It is a relentless and unforgiving track Americans are all but forced to travel down, and at the same time it is a cyclical, repetitive process that is predictable. Every generation has to contend with it in some form, some more than others. Although many of Reagan's political ideologies have been replaced or rendered obsolete, his elevation of consumerism as a way of life seems to never quite reach its zenith. Rides like these are the perfect microcosm of that, just as Spielberg's film captured back in the very first years post-Reagan in the 1990s. There is just enough "bite" to the social message without it coming across as preachy and overly ironic. Although it can be seen as admirable that this ride at least has somewhat of a social message, its main function here is to accentuate the peril that riders are going to endure, as Grady's warning about the greedy corporation is to highlight that they are willing to put people in jeopardy to make a profit. The visceral thrill of escaping the clutches of rogue dinosaurs is what makes the ride memorable. Projecting all blame of corporate greed on the fictional Jurassic World theme park seemingly expiates Universal itself from responsibility even though the fictional theme park has been brought to life by Universal on the screen both in movie theaters and in theme parks since 1993.

The act of literal consumption by the dinosaurs is alluded to quite a few times both in the *Jurassic* films and rides, and is often usually invoked as a source of comic relief to highlight the absurdity of humans playing God and disrupting the natural order of things. Like in many other instances, viewers are meant to direct any outrage toward reckless characters and fictional corporations which allows for the expiation on the part of Universal itself. In one key scene of *Jurassic Park*, park founder John Hammond notes how when Disneyland first opened, there were many hiccups and ride malfunctions, to which sardonic character Dr. Ian Malcolm quips back: "Yeah, John, but when the Pirates of the Caribbean breaks down, the pirates don't eat the tourists". Whereas Disney features many rides and attractions that allow consumers to experience various sanitized cultures and groups of people, and offers countless opportunities to immerse one's self as fully as possible into these sanitized, consumer-friendly worlds visa vie the gift shops located outside virtually every ride exit and all over the parks, none of the attractions are as daringly potentially deadly as those offered at Jurassic Park. Malcolm's joke is funny enough within the context of the film, but when one stops to consider that a ride would eventually be opened at Universal's theme parks based off of the film, it becomes even more comical. The ride was in development in tandem with the film, even though it would not finally open for three years following the film's release. It also interestingly doesn't directly lambaste Disney but instead implies that their rides even at their most intense are usually relatively tame. While this might seem at first to be a compliment, it can also be construed as a subtle dig at Disney's overall lack of thrilling experiences at their parks. The nearest equivalent of a ride similar to *Jurassic Park: The Ride* at Disney is Splash Mountain, whose drop is 35 feet less than that of *Jurassic Park: the Ride* and

the overall theming of Splash Mountain is much more sedate comparably. The *Jurassic Park* ride is just one of many examples of thrilling attractions based off of action franchises and movies that would emerge over the years at Universal's parks: *The Mummy*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *King Kong*, *Jaws*, *Back to the Future* and *Twister* to name just a few. Most of Disney's rides are themed to children's movies such as *Dumbo*, *Aladdin*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland*. Recently, the parks switched to an emphasis on *Star Wars* themed rides and attractions to combat the growing popularity of their rival's immersive *Harry Potter* attractions.

One of the most consummate examples in the park's history of riding the movies transported countless guests seamlessly between many different time periods: a ride sequel to the extremely popular action/sci-fi franchise *Back to the Future*. Michael J. Fox did not participate in the production of *Back to the Future: The Ride*, but in a way that major exclusion makes perfect sense to the dynamics of the theme park experience: the riders, in essence, sit in Marty's seat in the newest iteration of the time-traveling DeLorean and become Marty McFly. Although not an opening day attraction, the simulator based *Back to the Future: the Ride* was first opened to guests in May 1991, approximately a year after Universal Studios Florida opened. The impetus for the ride was a conversation between *Star Wars* director George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, a producer on *Back to the Future*, a few years prior where Lucas jokingly suggested that a *Star Tours* type ride would never be possible at Universal due to the playful professional rivalry between the two. Spielberg viewed this as a challenge he wanted to take on however, and did so with the creation of the *Back to the Future* ride. *Star Tours*, a simulator ride propelling guests into the world of *Star Wars* visa vie several potential

galactic battles (700 permutations of experiences are possible), still remains open at four Disney parks as of this writing. Although *Back to the Future: the Ride* is no longer open at any of Universal's Parks, the ride was quite popular at three different Universal Parks for well over a decade and remains beloved by theme park enthusiasts. Lucas' comment to Spielberg proved to be quite ironic due to the fact that Universal Parks ended up becoming the theme park company best known for simulator based movie rides, and although Disney's parks have started to feature more thrilling rides to compete with their main rival, their rides and attractions tend to fall under the category of traditional dark rides that are edutainment-based, feature leisurely storytelling, offer glimpses into the fantastic worlds of animated classic films, or a combination of all of the above.

The ride begins with a pre-show in which series villain Biff Tannen breaks into Doc Brown's newly founded haven of consumer research, the Institute of Future Technology, and his plans to steal a time machine to wreak havoc with the space-time continuum lead to Doc Brown pleading with riders to help track down Biff and recover the time machine. Although Doc asks for help, it is crucial to note that the simulator system does all of the actual work and riders merely observe and feel the help they are providing by watching the screen as the simulator shakes in accordance with whatever dodging, careening and accelerating is occurring on-screen. Doc explains that if the riders bump Tannen by accelerating to 88 miles per hour, a time vortex will open that will send both vehicles back to their original point of departure. As the actual ride begins, Doc pilots the time machine by remote control and the chase through time begins: Biff leads riders through various eras including Hill Valley 2015, including a stop at the Hill Valley Clock Tower, featured in every film as a crucial plot device. Subsequent chases include

the Ice Age, where an avalanche threatens the lives of the riders, and the Cretaceous

Period, where Biff's vehicle is attacked by a dinosaur who swallows the vehicle, spits it

out and drops it down a lava river toward the edge of a cliff. Biff begs for Doc's help, and

ultimately, both vehicles plunge over the edge and accelerate to 88 miles per hour,

sending both vehicles back to the Institute of Future Technology, present day. Biff is

thankful to the riders and Doc for saving his life, but is quickly apprehended by Doc's

assistants.

The ride interestingly does not ostensibly delve into themes of consumerism too

deeply as opposed to the main film franchise itself but instead focuses on Biff wreaking

havoc throughout various ages such as the Ice Age and the dinosaur age. The plot for the

ride is so simplistic it's hard to even gauge what Biff's motives are other than his desire

to thwart Doc Brown's life any chance he gets. The plot of this ride gives credence to the

notion that most rides' stories are not as important as the ride experiences themselves.

This is certainly true in the case of this ride, and fans of the franchise did not seem to

mind this one bit. Fans reveled at the mere idea of being able to "feel" themselves

travelling through time with Doc Brown. Universal knew this would be the case hence

the emphasis on the inventions specifically the time machines featured in the ride and

another interesting factor was that the ride offered new time periods for franchise fans to

enjoy. Whereas time travel in a majority of the films mainly served as a means to an end

to allow the McFly family to be proper American consumers, the ability to time travel

itself is the endgame in this attraction. The truth is, most people who shell out thousands

of dollars on a Disney and/or Universal vacation do not want to have to think very hard

about the experiences they are undertaking. Rides such as *Back to the Future: The Ride*

are perfect examples of this theme park mentality: we don't necessarily care why we're in the Ice Age with Doc Brown so much as we care how we got there- in a custom-made state-of-the-art time machine created exclusively for guests of Doc Brown's Institute of Future Technology. Doc tells riders that they are integral to the success of his invention, as they will be helping him to test the feasibility of the new time machine- just as Marty was crucial in saving Doc's life through the miracle of time travel, riders were told they were crucial to saving Doc's livelihood at the institute. This appeal to the audience was not new to theme park rides, but it was certainly used very effectively in this instance. One of the most unique and unquestionably amazing aspects of theme park rides is how immersive they can be compared to a regular movie-watching experience. This increased immersion ultimately benefits the theme park industry in multiple ways, namely that people will return for as many repeat rides as possible, and they will also want to bring home mementos to remind themselves of the experience.

Just like in the first *Back to the Future* movie, the correlation between high pop culture IQ and increased park-goer experience at both Universal and Disney is obvious. In the movie, Marty's knowledge of science-fiction movies has rewards for the very existence of his character- once the consequences of his time traveling adventures threatened his parents from ever falling in love in the first place, he thinks quick to remedy the situation. Knowing that his father is influenced by science-fiction, Marty uses this to his advantage by creeping into his father's bedroom and presenting himself as a version of a popular character that existed in 1985 but not in 1955. Interestingly, although Marty refers to himself as Darth Vader, he is dressed in a radiation suit, playing a tape of Van Halen music and says he is from the planet Vulcan. He is an amalgamation of a

bunch of different pop cultural influences that he grew up with. The fact that the audience is expected to laugh at this lighthearted moment in the film indicates not just that Marty is influenced by the pop culture he consumes and that he can benefit from it, but that everyone in the audience is influenced by what they consume and that they can benefit from their pop culture savvy as well. As Christopher Justice astutely posits in his critical essay on the film series: "Due to the ceaseless recycling of popular culture, reality in the 1980s was blurred beyond comprehension and became an illusion itself" (Justice 180). Marty stands in as the average American teenager consumer, as pointed out in an earlier chapter, one of the most pliable and impressionable demographics. Although there are fantastical elements such as the time travel storytelling angle involved in the franchise, the overall message being promoted by the film makes it clear that proper indulgence and immersion in American consumerism helps to clear many obstacles along Marty's path in the film. In the ride, time travel volunteers are rewarded for their pop culture knowledge as long as they are familiar with the films and are able to catch references and callbacks to the film series. There are callbacks to various jokes and plot points of the films, in addition to a familiar tune from Huey Lewis and the News that plays in the background as guests exit the ride and a clever nod to director Robert Zemeckis and writer Bob Gale since Doc uses Zemeckis-Gale coordinates to figure out what time periods the DeLorean travels to. While the ride can still be enjoyed by someone who has never seen the film, the experience is certainly more rewarding to a fan of the films, just like anyone who watches *Back to the Future* gets more of the jokes if they are knowledgeable consumers.

The pre-show features various members of the Institute showcasing the latest inventions of Doc Brown, and the purpose of this is to set the stage early on that

responsible creation warrants respectful appreciation and engagement with Doc's products. Most of Doc's inventions that are featured throughout the pre-show are presented as helpful to the proper functioning of the American household, including an automated flapjack maker, a "Suc-o-matic" vacuum and a timer-controlled dog food dispenser that is marketed as being perfect for "the busy housewife or scientist," seeming to imply that correcting old-fashioned gender roles are not something that Doc Brown has on his agenda. Furthermore, the pre-show sets the seeds early to "time travel volunteers" that technology in the right hands can aid in the proper functioning of the family unit, even down to the fact that they can go time traveling together. This is subtly conveyed to riders in between snippets of Biff intruding in the feed of the Institute of Future Technology, Biff representing the ultimate example of technology in the wrong hands.

The visually appealing sights and kinetic sounds that pervade the ride experience showcase the potential of time travel and other inventions as a means of bettering the future. Throughout the film series, time travel inventor Doctor Brown exhibits some reservations about his creation as various threats arise to the space-time continuum as well as to individual families and people. While at least one of these reasons is his own fault for stealing plutonium from Libyan terrorists to fuel the time machine, the franchise always found ways to excuse or justify such behavior because Doc's intentions were always represented as being for the greater good of humanity. Throughout the pre-show and the main ride, Doc Brown's further forays into time travel innovation are not even hinted at as being potentially harmful to the space-time continuum. Series villain Biff Tannen returns to wreak havoc, and any threats that arise are squarely directed at him. The glossing over of responsibility on the part of Doc and his colleagues at the Institute

of Future Technology, in addition to having Biff serve as a convenient scapegoat for all possible mayhem, shows that critical thought about real societal issues is frowned upon.

Whereas Doc Brown's motivations for time travel in the movies are almost always represented as to gain a clearer understanding of humanity and scientific progress, he now seems more interested in technological advances in terms of consumerism. He has pioneered an eight-passenger time travel vehicle (which matches the amount of people the simulator was built to accommodate) and lists one of the reasons for doing so as it can instantly transport people to sunny days, which comes across as fairly incongruous with Doc's initial motivations for creating time travel. While the end of *Back to the Future Part III* featured Doc Brown arriving back in 1985 Los Angeles to say hi to his friends Marty and Jennifer in a time-traveling steampunk flying train, it still seemed as if his main focus was on his family. His family is not mentioned or seen at all throughout the course of the ride, although a picture of Clara and Doc can be spotted in the background at one point. The ride's emphasis on technological consumerist advances highlights how immersion into hyperreal scenarios such as these in Doc Brown's Institute encourages the cycle of reciprocal consumerism to persist. The visceral thrills of being jostled around by the mechanics of the ride vehicle, all while staring at a screen depicting various time periods allows us to essentially become Marty McFly, so in a way it is an ideologically good thing that Michael J. Fox declined to reprise his role for this attraction. The movement of the ride vehicle coupled with the screen allow guests to truly ride the movies as Universal's famous tagline promises them they have the ability to do there:

> *Back to Future: the Ride* zaps the rider into the Future movies in the same way
> that Marty was zapped into his own movie. Strapped into the motion simulator,

you chase Biff into 2015, into the Ice Age, into the Jurassic period, and then step out blinking into the California sun, under the impression that the ride is over. We are Marty waking up, as he does in all three movies, with the falsely reassuring impression that we have been dreaming. But here we are, safe and sound, back in good old… hyperreality! (Laist, 229)

The conflation between reality and movie reality was indeed a hallmark of Reagan's tenure as President, and although it cannot be said that he was the first President to ever make reality sound more appealing than it truly is, his background as an actor made it even harder for both him and American citizens to distinguish the difference. Although the ride debuted a few years after he left office, Reagan's influence is naturally felt throughout every iteration of *Back to the Future* since the films so closely mirrored his policies and governance, as discussed in depth in Chapter Two. As good as they sounded in some of his speeches, Reagan's policies were often exclusionary to many people, favoring upper middle-class white males first and everyone else secondly at best, or at worst, some people would not benefit at all from his agendas. Marty McFly and his family initially represented a lower middle-class family, so Marty's journey served as an inspirational tale for the type of life that could be achieved through determination, hard work and immersion into the consumerist way of life. By the same token, the ability to subsume the role of Marty McFly as one of Doc's trusted assistants is presented in the ride as equally thrilling and empowering. Simultaneously, the riders are presented with a cautionary tale of what happens when people take advantage of the space-time continuum and use consumerist technology in a reckless way.

The periods of time hopped between throughout the course of the ride are quite different than those traversed throughout the films. For starters, only one time period explored in the films (other than present day) is travelled to, 2015. Other than that, the time periods riders experience eras that pre-date consumerism as we know it by millions of years. While this is an interesting choice for a franchise so deeply ingratiated to the concept of capitalistic consumption, it makes sense: indeed, it seems that a great deal of the peril that riders experience as they are being jostled by dinosaurs and dodging avalanches is their profound distance from the comforts of consumerism that they have become accustomed to. The contrast between the last two ancient time periods explored in the ride and the first time period jumped to in the ride is startling and provides a feeling of heightened time whiplash. The sights and sounds explored in the 2015 timeline are presented as futuristic and exciting, with the only element of danger really stemming from Biff's disregard for the sanctity of the space-time continuum.

While the viewers of films can engage on some level with the "movie magic" on display visa vie enjoying the special and practical effects employed in addition to the acting of the performers, riders of *Back to the Future: the Ride*, and indeed any thrill ride based off of a popular franchise, are privy to a thrilling experience that incorporates and ensnares most of the senses: in most cases, touch, sound, sight and even smell. The careful manufacturing of illusion via what environment the ride designers and theme parks are trying to evoke makes Baudrillard's following claim about Disneyland extremely relevant to the discussion of the blurred lines between reality and artifice: "The Disneyland imaginary is neither true or false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile

degeneration of this imaginary. It's meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the "real" world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere, particularly among those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions of their real childishness" (Baudrillard 13). The blurring of lines is deliberate by the people who control the cultural fabric of American society, because just like in the political world, concepts and ideas are what give people the hope necessary to survive in a society that is actually cruel, corrupt and dominated by greed and socioeconomic clout. Although not ostensibly, Disney and Universal are actually deeply political, and in many ways the reciprocal relationship between the companies and their consumers is the best political snapshot one could have of how America functions.

As discussed in Chapter Two, President Reagan adored *Back to the Future*, and one of the reasons was likely that he saw himself in the protagonist Marty McFly: indeed, he too was born to a middle-class family, was an avid consumer and fan of pop culture, and an average student who cared more about sports and spending time with his friends. Although he did beat the odds and climb the socioeconomic and political ladder through his careers in radio broadcasting, acting and ultimately politics, the policies the President enacted throughout his career led to a stagnation of wages, the slashing of social services and more which inherently ruined the chances of many Americans to experience success stories of their own. As also previously mentioned, Reagan's acting background also likely helped in duping many Americans through his speeches, some of which even quoted *Back to the Future*. The rose-colored glasses he saw, or at least claimed to see the country through, were a perfect match for the politics of the film franchise. Although it's unclear whether or not if Reagan ever got to experience the ride, it was and remains in

legacy one of the best microcosms for engagement with Reaganite ideology, and in most cases, serves as the ultimate example of the disconnect between reality and the daydreams that fuel the *Future* franchise and make it so beloved.

Knowledge of theme park history is psychologically rewarded at Universal, which parallels how observant, diligent consumers are psychologically rewarded watching *Back to the Future* in that they will understand and appreciate more jokes. In the case of *Back to the Future: the Ride*'s replacement *The Simpsons Ride*, a pre-show video features Dr. Emmett Brown being forced to hand over the Institute for Future Technology (the fictional building in which the old ride was set) to Krusty the Klown so he can convert it to house attractions at his theme park. *The Simpsons Ride* in general parodies the theme park industry while simultaneously contributing to its ethos, and this scene in particular hints at the unforgiving nature of major corporations when it's time to think of new ways to boost revenue and foot traffic. Since *Back to the Future* was starting to dwindle in popularity and *The Simpsons* was still in its prime when *The Simpsons Ride* opened, the powers that be decided to shutter the old attraction and start something new, all the while allowing fans to be privy to this transformation and to be able to be on the "joke". The brass were literally banking on the fact that guests wouldn't piece together that they are being psychologically manipulated constantly by the companies that they are given the illusion of believing that they are a part of, and even scarier, if they did figure it out, that they wouldn't care, since people maintaining the illusion of positive consumer life is what keeps a significant amount of the population employed and questioning it would be too potentially destructive to their families.

One of Universal's most popular attractions of all time ceased operation recently to focus on newer, more marketable franchises. The attraction was *T2 3D: Battle Across Time*, a thrilling and immersive 3-D mini-sequel to one of the most popular action films of all time, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. What sets this attraction apart from many others up until the time of its release is how pioneering it was in terms of theme park storytelling. Most other major attractions up to this point had thin storylines to say the least, and the main goal of these attractions was to reel in audiences because of the Intellectual Property in question. *T2: 3D* opened with a pre-show video that explained the basic plot of the first two Terminator movies mainly in order to ensure that everyone who stepped foot inside the theater could understand what was about to unfold in front of them. Whereas one probably never even had to have seen *E.T.* in order to experience the ride based off of it, some knowledge of the *Terminator* universe was crucial to enjoying *T2: 3D*. It had a story to tell, and originally James Cameron even intended for it to be a bridge between *Terminator 2* and a full-length third *Terminator* film. The story honed in on Cyberdyne's original supposed function as "The Future of National Defense" to quote Cameron's script and what aftermath ensues from Cyberdyne employees thinking that computers controlling every facet of human existence is a smart idea. While the attraction is nowhere near as preachy and hard-hitting as Cameron's social commentary in the theatrical film, the message is still there albeit greatly toned down and more of an emphasis is placed on other elements of the *Terminator* universe instead.

The pre-show to this attraction is hosted in the Miles Bennett Dyson Memorial Auditorium, named after the inventor of the microprocessor that was destined to lead to the development of Skynet, the computer company that threatens to destroy humanity

throughout the *Terminator* films. The audience is treated to a promotional video for Cyberdyne, the company Dyson worked for and presumably helped destroy for good during the events of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, which tells of all of the technological advancements the company has pioneered. The feed is interrupted by the Connors, the human protagonists of the franchise who warn everyone that they are in danger. A Cyberdyne representative urges viewers to ignore the Connors and ushers guests into a large theater where they are told they are going to watch a demonstration of Cyberdyne's latest creation, an Autonomous Infantry Unit.

In the theater, the demonstration is quickly interrupted by John and Sarah who force the Cyberdyne employee to shut down the machines. Shortly thereafter, another version of the T-1000 Terminator vanquished by the Connors in the second film (once again played by Robert Patrick) appears and kills the Cyberdyne employee and pursues the Connors. Another T-800 Terminator once again played by Arnold Schwarzenegger bursts through the movie screen through a time portal on his signature Harley-Davidson motorcycle and rescues John. They travel through the time portal together to war-ravaged 2029 in an effort to penetrate Skynet's facility and destroy the system core of Skynet, while Sarah stays behind. Ultimately, John and the Terminator are forced to contend against a T-1000000, a giant liquid-metal Terminator defending the system core that is basically a larger version of the T-1000. Before the gigantic machine can kill John, the Terminator sends John to a time portal nearby that transports him back to present day while he stays behind to obliterate the T-1000000 along with Skynet's system core. The attraction ends with a voiceover from Sarah Connor that has her thanking a heroic

Terminator for once again saving her son's life as the screen shows an image of a Terminator endoskeleton that gradually morphs into Schwarzenegger's likeness.

Perhaps the greatest irony of *T2: 3D* is that its decidedly cautious message regarding the potential pitfalls of advanced technology is being disseminated in a theme park full of unprecedented technology which directs its consumers to constantly crave as an escape from the "real world". Despite this, the main goal of the attraction is to showcase state-of-the-art special effects and guests revel in the manufactured danger they are put in. The experience of shows like *T2: 3D* is what sets them apart from traditional movie theater offerings: the seats vibrate and even drop at key points in the action, and live actors at Universal interact with the on-screen stars seamlessly through special effects and slight-of-hand staging. As much as traditional movie theaters can emotionally transport patrons to other worlds and "realities," attractions such as this take the illusion one step further and physically move people as well. Since guests in these types of attractions are really not going anywhere, this is a great metaphor for what theme parks do in general: momentarily distract individuals through illusion, spectacle and visceral thrills in order to keep them from thinking too critically about the work-a-day realities they are there to escape from.

While Disney and Universal might differ in their approaches of what to offer guests who want to escape from the real world, both provide ostensible escapes nonetheless. They are not ultimately escapes, though, but rather carefully constructed illusions of escape in order to perpetuate the cycle of consumption that fuels the company and America overall. Umberto Eco posits that everything at theme parks is manipulated so that technology and the created atmosphere can provide more reality than nature can:

"Disneyland tells us that faked nature corresponds much more to our daydream demands… that technology can give us more reality than nature can" (Eco 78). Nature itself does not inherently offer any consumerist potential which can very well be a reason that Disney (and Universal as well) decided that it would be a good idea to invoke some nature within their parks, in addition to making the parks appear more "natural". Just as with ideals of unrealistic family values invoked by the theming of the parks, invoking ideal versions of nature makes sense because it allows park visitors to imagine what an all-around ideal world could look like, while constantly reminding them that this ideal can only be found within the confines of the parks and is deeply contingent on engagement with consumerist lifestyle. There is even a moment in *T2:3D* where Cyberdyne shows off one of their newest marvels in the pre-show video: electronic butterflies. Although the employees of Cyberdyne are given the antagonist role in this attraction due to their mishandling of technology and inability to realize how too much control over technology especially defense technology can be dangerous, this takes the audiences' attention away from the fact that the theme parks and America itself are not much better.

This attraction, like many others at the major theme parks, highlights impressive technological marvels while simultaneously castigating the characters in each attraction that seek too much control- all of this serves as a way of moving the plots forward while also steering people from thinking too hard about whether or not the villainous characters share any traits in common with those in power at the Universal or Disney corporations. In any case, when this particular attraction was first opened, Pandora's box had already been opened and technology was already starting to overpower our lives. In this light, the

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attraction can be seen as a worst-possible case scenario of what could happen when humans are too reliant on technology. Universal's shows and attractions, such as this one, and perhaps especially this one, are available to anyone (for the right price) that would like to escape the real world--- but the irony is that many of these attractions speak to real-life concerns. This show is presented in a fairly campy tone especially during the pre-show and the fact that much of it takes place in a "distant future" makes its threats seem like they are completely relegated to a make-believe dimension. Ultimately, Universal knows that one human emotion that is truly "universal" is fear- and it also knows that one cannot just leave their fears at the turnstiles to enter the park. By featuring many rides, shows and the like that take place in distant futures, alternate realities and so on and so forth, Universal developers know that we will use these experiences as a way of coping and assuaging our real-life concerns. Still, the ultimate goal at the end of most of the thrilling experiences and rides is that you get to be awed and thrilled by special effects and exit to a far safer world than the characters in these stories live and sometimes die in.

T2: 3D takes the horrifying concept of the source material, nuclear war, and tames it, choosing to focus on the technological advances of the machines above all else. Interestingly, once the framework of nuclear Armageddon has been established, most of the attraction does not feature overly gritty scenes like the full-length film itself does. *T2: 3D* is not the only attraction at a Universal or Disney park that glosses over the more unpalatable elements of the movies that some rides and attractions are based off of, but it is perhaps the consummate example. Whatever types of movies the little shopgirls of the modern era are checking out at the movie theaters gives theme park developers, mall

owners and more ideas about how to cater to audiences. In almost all modern cases, theme park attraction possibilities are usually explored in the development process of big-budget spectacle movies. The success of *T2: 3D* ushered in a new era of theme park attractions--- whereas before, rides and shows having a symbiotic relationship with movie franchises was rare, it started to become the norm.

Sarah Connor's gravitas is what sets the stakes for the attraction and grounds it in a sense in "reality"- but in the case of this attraction, reality is only desired in the sense that it allows the main narrative of the spectacle to unfold. The entire principal cast from *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* returned for the on-screen portion of this mini-sequel which was written and directed by series creator James Cameron. The attraction was groundbreaking in that it incorporated live elements as well, with each main film character also being represented on stage at various points in the action. As the only human character sent into the future throughout the attraction (he is accompanied by the T-800), Connor essentially acts as the audiences' surrogate for the whole dynamic experience, in a similar way to how Doc Brown's helpers in the *Back to the Future* ride subsume the role of franchise hero Marty McFly. As in that ride as well, the story is not as important as the spectacle. Troublingly, the dire tone of the *Terminator* franchise is mostly lost as a result, which serves as arguably even more of an issue than in the case of *Back to the Future* since the issues worked through in the *Terminator* films were deep meditations on life-and-death ramifications of global proportions, as discussed in Chapters One and Two. Meanwhile, the politics of the *Future* franchise were always more concerned with navigating the success of one particular nuclear family. In the *Terminator* attraction, the word nuclear does not appear once either in the pre-show or in

the main show. The pre-show does include a brief recap of the events of the second film which features a snippet of nuclear destruction but it is essentially only included to set up the narrative of the show. The crux of the show itself is set in the post-apocalyptic landscape of 2029, but the main horrifying images displayed throughout the second film such as imaginings of nuclear nightmares are traded for 3-D tricks such as the T-1000 coming out of the screen and scanning the room for the Connors, where every audience member is made to feel like the villain is staring directly at them.

The overall tone of the attraction is perhaps best summed up by a moment where the Terminator blasts an enemy machine into oblivion, propelling its skull into the air and once again appearing to land directly in the field of vision of each person in the room. The script of the attraction describes the moment in the following way: "Out of the fiery explosion, the dead Endo's metallic head comes flying out, DIRECTLY AT US, in horrific 3-D" (Cameron, 1995). Any "horrific" emotions that might be evoked during this moment, however, are immediately offset by Schwarzenegger cracking a joke: "He was my college roommate". While it is true that the second film leaned into comedic moments in a way that seemed to jar many fans of the original, one of the facets that helped change the genre of the franchise from horror sci-fi to predominantly action with sci-fi elements, the jokes provided throughout this attraction are hammy and delivered to distract audiences from the deep original themes of the franchise. Essentially, the jokes turn the comic relief from the important questions and concerns of the film source material into a source of laughing into the face of such concerns in order to push the main agenda of this entry into the *Terminator* canon: to highlight that technological advances can be awe-inspiring and can benefit society if handled in the right way. Although both

T2 and *T2:3D* feature culminating scenes of Schwarzenegger's character sacrificing himself to save the Connors, even the tenor of these scenes comes across as different, as evidenced by Sarah's closing monologues. As previously discussed in Chapter Four, Sarah's monologue at the end of *Terminator 2* focuses on how the sacrifice of the machine gives hope for the future of the human race, the monologue here is much more succinct and hinges on how Sarah once again owes her life and that of her son's to that of a machine, a Terminator. Although the closing lines of the attraction do not exactly encourage every household to have its own Terminator, they do focus more on the admiration of the machine itself whereas the monologue at the end of *Terminator 2* focused more on how Sarah was given more of a glimpse into how humanity can learn from the calamities her family has been through visa-vie the reprogrammed machine, which seems telling.

American society is fueled by images and the emotional and psychological impact they have, but these images are often used to keep citizens pacified and seemingly content. Images and the way they are exhibited matter more than any kind of deeper meaning the images or their source material ever seek to convey. Previous chapters have discussed Frankfurt School theorist Siegfried Kracauer and analyzed how the films of the 1980s can be read under a Kracauerian lens, essentially how they reflect the real social concerns of society in different ways. Film theorist Michelle Pierson engages with Kracauer in a book on the correlation between special effects, simulation and reality: "It is possible not only to acknowledge the aesthetic legitimacy of a popular film genre but more particularly the virtuosity of the animator's craft and still argue, as Kracauer has done, that there are limits to what can be achieved in this medium in terms of aesthetic

novelty. Kracauer helps us to appreciate more fully why special effects, which rely so strongly on visual novelty to draw the eye and solicit the imagination, simply disappear when all about them is the same photorealistic wallpaper" (Pierson 153). Ironically, in this instance, she is talking about the phenomenon of increasingly realistic looking Disney movies, but the sentiments apply also to the rides and attractions of Disney and Universal Parks, since all the movies, attractions and stores under the umbrella of these companies thrive on the same circuitous loop of conspicuous consumerism. Essentially, the theming and messaging of the rides and attractions at these parks will always end up endorsing the continuous smooth functioning of this consumer mecca, and attractions such as *Back to the Future: the Ride* and *T2:3D* make it abundantly clear that careful use and manipulation of technology is one of the best ways of engaging with and immersing one's self into the fray of consumerist bliss. The sensory overload evoked keeps paying patrons in a state of wonder and awe that distracts them from ever thinking too hard about the toxic symbiosis that keeps the theme parks running in the first place: the extreme socioeconomic divide between the literal gatekeepers of the illusions and those who desperately line up every day for some respite from their "real" life problems. They stand there, waiting patiently for this temporary relief, unaware or even worse, aware of the divide but feeling unable to do anything concrete about it so they choose to instead dive headfirst into the illusion that convinces them capitalistic life is full of promise, progress and innovation.

Although Cameron's personal investment with storytelling and his passion for the cause of the anti-nuclear movement imbued *Terminator 2* with a deep message, the theme park attraction ends up recycling one-liners and genre tropes that helped to make the

feature-length film an international phenomenon in the first place, which dilutes the message of the source material and even perhaps the original intent of the attraction. Stephen M. Fjellman depressingly notes that our real world is so riddled with "technological systems--- television, computers, nuclear and biological devices--- that separate people from each other and make their individual lives increasingly insignificant," so therefore theme park attractions help to distract people from thinking too deeply about real world problems and sucks them further into a consumerist cocoon that only the corporations themselves end up truly profiting from. Universal's ultimate goal was to make money off of the attraction and they knew all of the boxes they had to check off in order to achieve this- and sadly, powerful social message ranks low on this list. This isn't just true to this particular attraction, but to the industry as a whole. Still, the message is there however subtly and the franchise itself is an inescapable meditation on death and nuclear war. That being said, it does force its audience to at least subconsciously realize that the only reason this fun attraction exists is due to the fact that the humans in the mythos of the Terminator were so invested in the idea of "defense" against foreign enemies that they never stopped to realize that the weapons they built could become sentient on their own and view all of humanity as a threat. Back in the real world, world citizens barely survived total annihilation thanks to the concept that almost became a reality of Mutually Assured Destruction. There seems to be no better way to cope with this fear than to imagine oneself on a motorcycle with John Connor and the Terminator, trying to ride away from nuclear Armageddon as fast and furiously as possible.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation sought to unpack how American popular films of the 1980s engaged in various ways with the dominant political ideology of the time. Since Ronald Reagan was a two term President and his tone also shifted greatly in terms of his diplomatic relations in his second term, I felt it appropriate to devote the first chapter to Term One and the second to Term Two. Chapters One and Two discussed how two popular films from the era negotiated the concepts of consumerism and nuclear war albeit in dramatically different ways: James Cameron's *The Terminator* as a warning for what can happen if a society is too reliant on technology and consumption and Robert Zemeckis' *Back to the Future* as a celebration of technological progress and consumption within the nuclear family. Chapters Three and Four discussed two films, John McTiernan's *Die Hard* and James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, using both films to highlight societal concerns about an evolving culture in terms of gender roles and conceptions of terrorism and other concerns regarding foreign policy. Finally, a fifth chapter devoted to rides and attractions at Disney and Universal Parks highlighted the growing societal distance between reality and illusion in terms of what people crave and try to emulate in their own lives, which when all is said and done benefits only those who produce and profit off of the illusions.

When I embarked on this project, I found it quite interesting and bewildering how there was such a disparity between popular 1980s action/adventure/sci-fi films and film criticism. Although some of the most consumed and talked about films in the world, most criticism I encountered either completely ignored or dismissed them as unworthy of analysis. I was pleased over the years of the development of this project as I began to

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notice more and more appreciation for my favorite decade of popular film. In 2018, I even got the chance to contribute to an anthology on legendary director James Cameron, penning a piece on the *Terminator* franchise about its negotiation of the topic of nuclear war--- some of which was featured and expanded upon throughout this dissertation. Writing this dissertation has indeed been a labor of love that has been equal parts challenging and riveting to me, allowing me to dig even deeper than I originally thought would be possible in terms of talking about both the subtle and more overt politics of these films. What I hope I have accomplished is to have made it abundantly clear that films such as those that make up the *Terminator* franchise, *Back to the Future* and *Die Hard* should not be dismissed as mindless popcorn movies but rather navigate and grapple with serious societal issues in various ways. While it is true that every era naturally reflects the dominant political ethos of the time, films of the 1980s took this to the next level, with the lines between reality and hyperreality blurred even further visa vie abstract inherently political ideals promoted by an actor-turned-President. Although most of the rides and attractions of Disney and Universal do not feature as much potent social commentary as their filmic progenitors, the legacies of these attractions speak to the fact that they in some way help people contend with the feelings of banality, hopelessness and apathy that being trapped in a circuitous cycle of competitive consumerism engenders.

Beyond a desire to deeply engage with some of my favorite films of all time under an academic lens, a secondary concern began to emerge as I was formulating my own ideas in relation to theorists of various time periods and specialties including Marxists, Freudians, and more. My careful writing and editing led me to realize just how

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insidious and daunting the concept of consumerism has been to people the world over, but especially Americans who are led to believe from cradle to grave that immersion into consumerist lifestyle can grant them successful and relatively carefree lives. In addition to the fact that it made most sense to place my theme park chapter last after two dense chapters on the politics of action/adventure/sci-fi movies of the 1980s, I also did so because I feel that the concept of the "Disney" and/or "Universal" vacation is the best parable for the slippery slope that is life under capitalism.

I believe that this example from my own personal life perhaps best illustrates the alarmingly morally corrupt disparity between classes that the movies and attractions discussed throughout this dissertation have been subtly skirting around for decades. My parents, raising four children with relatively modest middle-class incomes, could not afford to take my siblings and I to Disney World and the like, so we instead went often on smaller scale and more affordable vacations such as destinations on the Jersey Shore and Lake George. I went to Disney World for the first time with my roommate in junior year of college and we went two or three times together between the years of 2012-2016. Additionally, between the years of 2018 and 2021, I was able to book trips with some of my loved ones at least once or twice a year to Disney and Universal Parks. As time went on, prices continued to rise astronomically to the point that since 2021, a return trip has been impossible. In addition to rising ticket prices, the parks have implemented many more financial impediments that have essentially priced my family, friends and I out of these parks and forced us to consider other options for vacation destinations. Whereas a little more than ten years ago, it was affordable even for struggling college students to gain admission to the "most magical places on Earth," as of this writing in 2024 a new

phenomenon has emerged where lower middle-class families and even some upper middle-class families can no longer afford theme park centered vacations, which calls into question even further the dangers of hyperreality. Still, clever and manipulative marketing is constantly on television, streaming service Disney Plus and elsewhere that paints the Parks as such a magical experience for the whole family that people scrimp and save as hard as they can in order to allow their families the chance to experience the magic. Even if it is a financially irresponsible move for the adults to book these vacations, they temporarily grant them access to the illusion of the American dream fulfilled.

Chapter Five focused on the disconnect between the producers of the illusions/immersive tactile and sensory experiences at Disney and Universal parks and those who typically give themselves over to the illusion, the average American consumer. Part of the reason for this disconnect is the severe socioeconomic disparity between different classes, with the manufacturers of such illusions typically occupying the upper stratums of society (park executives, actors, and the like) and a majority of patrons at the opposite end of the spectrum. Although famous people have attended Disney Parks since Disneyland first opened its gates in the 1950s, recent reports have indicated that celebrities have been renting out large sections of the parks for them and their loved ones to enjoy, shutting out the public from those areas of the parks on certain days. This begs the question of what purpose it serves for elite members of society to immerse themselves in the same types of simulations that provide hope for average American citizens that simultaneously view these parks as a chance to escape their realities and inspiration for how to live their lives in ways that can allow them to potentially reap the same benefits of

society that the fictional characters of the various rides and attractions enjoy within the kinetic milieus they inhabit and thrive within.

The fact that the illusions are craved so voraciously by people of every class status, but only certain people are able to afford it anymore makes the Disney and Universal vacation a borderline dystopian nightmare- although it can be argued that it always has been. Walt Disney himself originally envisioned Disneyland as a fun escape for the whole family- and although it always was a business, he always wanted to keep it affordable for the average American family. Of course, even this can be argued and even if it was true, it can still be seen as merely a practical business decision rather than representing a personal desire of Walt Disney's. Many businesses do seem to draw in more happy customers when they offer incentives such as low prices and loyalty rewards, so this might have very well been part of his decision to keep the parks affordable. As of late, however, Disney especially has been in the news quite a bit in reference to tumultuous, greedy leadership and bids of various investors to gain board seats in the company, the latest of which is Nelson Peltz, an octogenarian billionaire who already is a board member of various successful companies such as Madison Square Garden and fast food giant Wendy's. According to the *New York Times*, Walt Disney's great nephew Roy P. Disney declared that "These activists must be defeated. They are not interested in preserving the Disney magic, but stripping it to the bone to make a quick profit for themselves" (Barnes 1). This quote is quite striking for a number of reasons. To begin with, even in an article about such a serious business issue, the word magic is invoked in what appears to be an appeal to pathos in order to convince the public that they should not support Peltz's bid. Secondly, the concept of magic is implied to be the glue that

holds Disney Parks together, giving even more credence to the theory explored in Chapter Five of how hyperreality has become more important than reality itself. Finally, this appeal to pathos seems to indicate that Disney's heirs either do not think that the current leadership has the same purely economic concerns in mind or that the Disney family endorses the greed of their current CEOs. Regardless, they do not want any potential interference in what they consider to be smooth operations of the company. However, it appears that there is significant in-fighting within the Disney family as to opinions on how the Parks are being run, the most vocal of which being Walt Disney's niece Abigail Disney who has admitted her disdain for the leadership of the latest string of CEOs including Robert Chapek and Robert Iger. Regardless, it is clear that there has been much more significant discussion about financial matters than about the creative decisions of the company. Again, this does make practical sense since it is first and foremost a business, but the fact that most of the time when these business decisions are talked about, magic and creativity is in some way evoked speaks to the troubling reality of America overall, especially since Reagan took office. While movies can offer temporary escapes ala *Back to the Future* or pseudo escapes in the vein of the first two *Terminator* films, their potency as hyperreal objects which help to promote or question the dominant ideological narrative of the country is limited in that filmgoers quickly return back to their ordinary lives after the credits roll. Major theme parks, on the other hand, are typically entered into as part of an expansive, multi-day minimum vacation getaway. The parks often seek to keep guests staying on their property throughout the duration of the trip by offering perks such as discounted hotels and early park admission. All of this is done in a concerted effort to pigeonhole guests into essentially living,

breathing and sleeping the essence of the company. By offering diverse food offerings, an array of hotel choices, shopping opportunities galore and state-of-the-art, technological marvels in the forms of rides and attractions, the major theme parks are essentially little cities. In fact, one of Disney's most famous theme parks, EPCOT was initially designed by Walt Disney as a potential real town hence why its initials stand for Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow. Scrapped after Disney's death when the logistics of running a city seemed too big for even the Disney company, the company did try again later with the town of Celebration, Florida. Even though the company was even more firmly established at this point, the Community by all reports was not run well by Disney and angered many of its residents especially when the company sold the town to private investors in 2004. All of this speaks to the fact that Disney's illusions can only effectively function because of the inherent disparity between fantasy and reality. Although fantastic at planning and executing their rides and attractions, when they try to engage with reality in any tangible way such as when they tried to incorporate an actual town in Florida, the company falters. While it is one thing for Walt Disney to have created a place where parents and children can have equal amounts of fun, it is quite another thing to use this illusory power in order to dominate and actively promote the gap between classes. Many employees have fallen under the spell of Disney's illusions: although many have come forward about Disney's stinginess in terms of "Cast Member" salaries, the same employees note how "fun" it is to work at the most magical place on Earth. Meanwhile, the salaries of those in charge at the company continue to skyrocket to an increasingly unreasonable degree. Similar trends happen all across the entertainment industry, including movies, including and especially those distributed and/or financed by the

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Disney corporation. The divide between classes becomes even more apparent when manifestations are physically and psychologically all around at theme parks: the ultimate example being when a homeless cast member died in a parking lot at Disney in 2016. While there has always been a correlation between corporate greed and the entertainment industry, and in many ways the entertainment industry is fueled by corporate greed, the correlation between politics, entertainment and the economy seemed to reach its peak in the 1980s with the consumerism-obsessed Reagan era. However, with the election and aftermath of yet another celebrity to the Oval Office in 2016 who once again ushered in an era of privilege for upper middle-class and rich white families and of exclusivity for many other groups of people, this topic feels more relevant than ever. Even before Trump's election, the American entertainment industry pushed many sequels, reboots and tributes to popular culture of the 1980s, which indicates that consumerism as a way of life could just not be shaken once it had already been promoted to a dysfunctional degree. Only once the collective American society of consumers decides that real social issues deserve to be talked about more than nostalgia bait can the entertainment industry ever possibly reflect a truly accurate portrait of reality. Until then, the fictional family on the constantly rotating, circuitous loop that is the Carousel of Progress will continue to serve as a perfect microcosm for American citizens at the mercy of the American entertainment industry: existing to consume unquestionably and to not desire much more than to contribute to a society fueled by shaky ideals.

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