

AMERICAN CINEMA OF THE 1980S

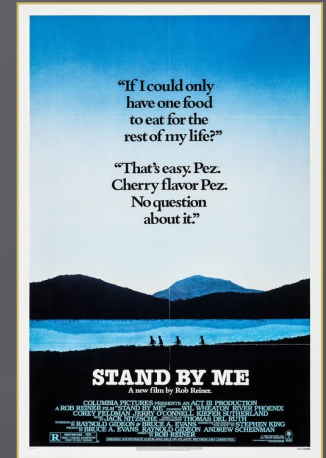
Topic Four: Family Films

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Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

1. The institutionalization of the Family Films
2. The ways they address challenges facing children and caregivers
3. How the films promote themselves as family therapy



The American Family in the 1980s

The family was one of the key sites of sociopolitical discourse in 1980s America, due largely to its mobilization by right-wing stakeholders

The neoconservative ideological backers of the Reagan Whitehouse romanticized the nuclear family at a time when it was under great strain

It is generally assumed that 1980s Hollywood films about the family – except horror – also romanticize the nuclear family, especially fathers

However, at this time, Hollywood films made for and about the family typically approached the family as a site of vulnerability and pain

Hollywood's depiction of the family in crisis was intended to maximize revenues, positioning Hollywood products as solutions to such crises

The Hollywood Family Film in the 1980s

Hollywood handled countless Family Films in the 1980s, contributing to this format becoming among its most important in the years since

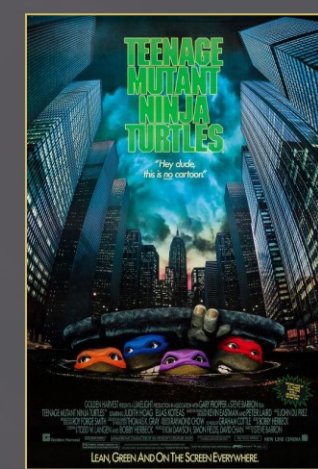
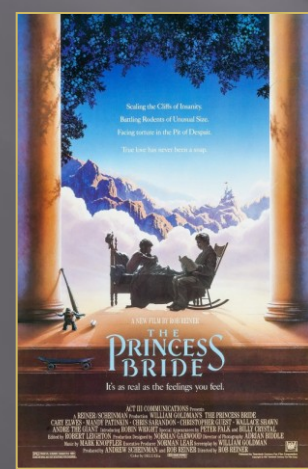
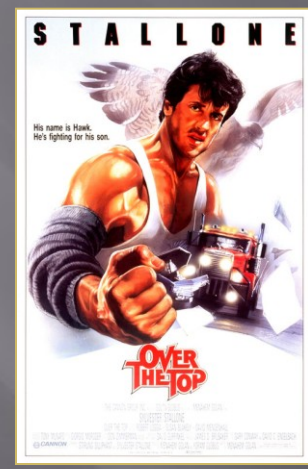
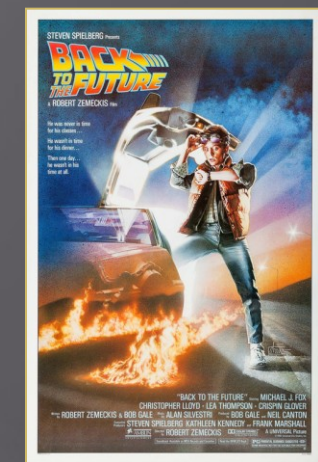
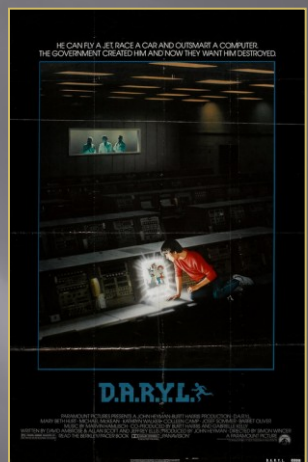
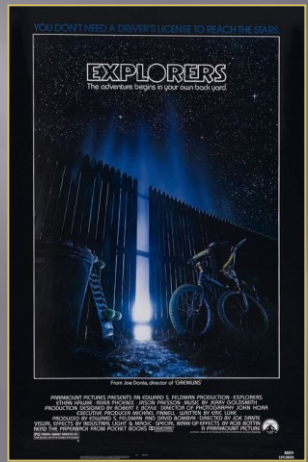
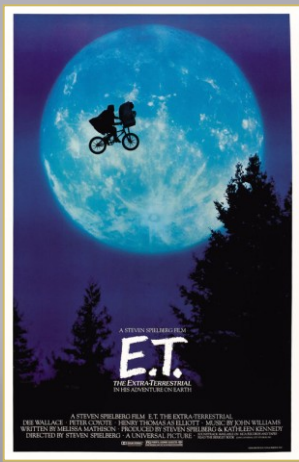
As Noel Brown argues, the family film would remain a cornerstone of Hollywood output thereafter, from Pixar to *Harry Potter* and beyond

Steven Spielberg and his production house Amblin Pictures was the key contributor in the first half of the 1980s, both industrially and culturally

Films like *E.T.* (1982) and *The Goonies* (1984) cast the suburban family as a site of pain and horror, but also a site of potential awe and wonder

Such hits generated large numbers of similar films, before the format became institutionalized as a facet of Hollywood output at decade's end

Family Films



Allen and the Family Film

In perhaps the most important paper on the Family Film, Allen explains why the format became so important to Hollywood in the 1980s

What conditions led Hollywood to embrace family films in the 1980s?

How are these films positioned within the everyday lives of families?

The Family Film as **High-Gain Risk-Management Strategy**

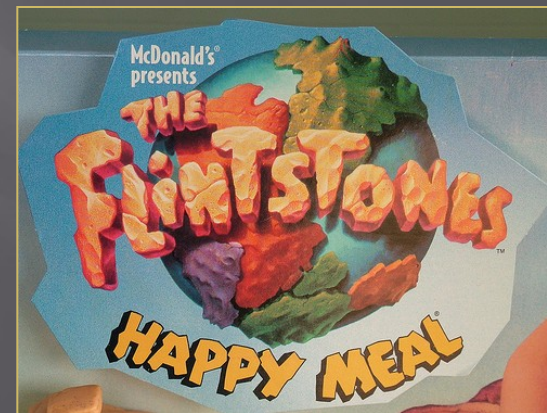
Allen argues the institutionalization of the family film in the 1980s resulted from several factors:

Demographics: Or a Large Market – Baby-boomers spawns the Echo Boom, while youth market declines

Technology: Or Increased Accessibility – VCRs facilitated convenient domestic film consumption

Politics: Or a Positive Brand Image – a solution to conservative charges that Hollywood was immoral

Ancillary Markets: Or Facilitating Synergy – kids consume branded products like toys and snacks



From Generative Mechanisms to Place in the (Family) Universe

The phenomena incentivizing family film production also help account for the psychosocial ambitions of this format



They explain how the format developed into wholesome, multigeneration fare imbedded in the home and leisure sites



These qualities, and locations of visibility, anthropomorphize the family film, making it akin to a member of the family



The format is thus positioned as a vehicle to help children and adults address challenges related to postmodern family life



Hollywood positions itself and products as therapeutic agents; as the glue binding families together in front of the screen



Family Films as Therapeutic Cinema

(See Kramer, 1988)

Imbedding the films in family life harmonized with the use of the format to foster intergenerational understanding, textually

Family films invite children and caregivers to reflect on each others experiences inside and outside family life, thusly:

Children:

1. Are shown mediations on issues they may experience
2. Are also shown how caregivers experience these things

Adults

1. Are shown how children might experience challenges
2. Are shown how caregivers' experiences these things
3. But they are also reminded of what childhood was like



Two Overlooked 1980s Family Film Trends

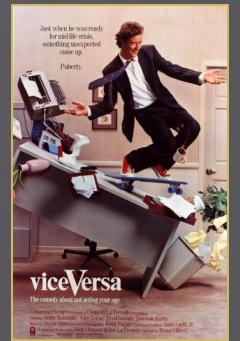
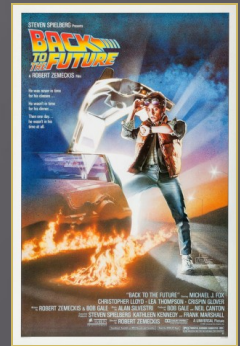
Helping us understand how family films operate this way are two intersecting production trends of the mid-to-late 1980s

Both have been underexamined by scholars, who focused on Amblin films of 1982-85, or films released in the early 1990s

The first is the Time Travel narrative, in which adults in the 1980s go back in time to reevaluate their younger years

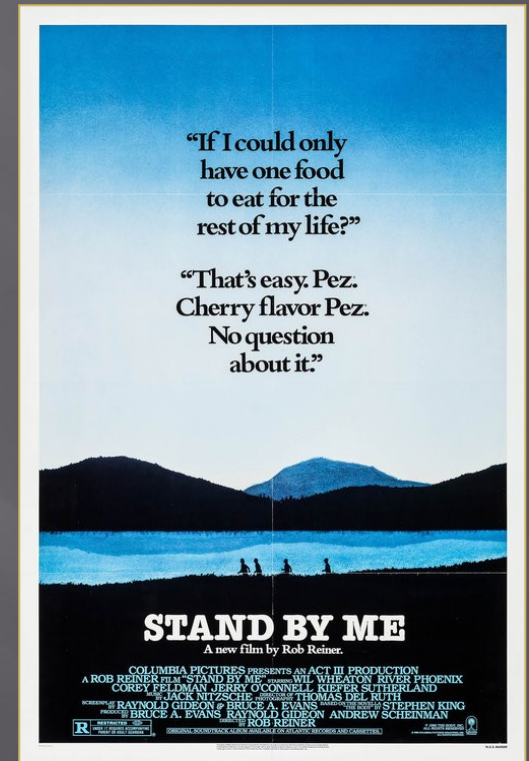
The second is the Body Swap narrative, in which children and adults swap places to better understand each others lives

Both of them help us better to understand this format as they literalize in their stories the family film's modes of address



Stand By Me (1986)

1. How does this film depict challenges facing children?
2. How does this film depict the challenges facing caregivers?
3. How does this film suggest watching films like itself can help families?



“You Didn’t Know Whether to Laugh or Cry”

Stand By Me offers a haunting self-reflexive allegory about how the consumption of stories can support troubled children



The film merges identity figures by having an adult parent in the 1980s reflecting on his experiences as a neglected child



It offers a sobering address to children and parents about the long-lasting impact of adult cruelty and neglect on children



It promotes its psychosocial agenda by showing how popular media offer uplift, connection, and support to both age groups



In so doing, it invites both age groups to join the characters’ “therapy sessions”, while joining in their adventures



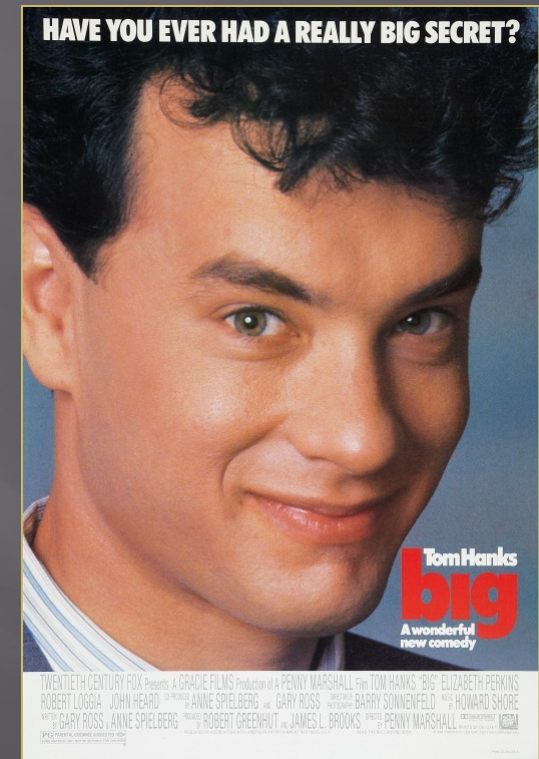
Ben E. King, “Stand By Me” Video: **Extending the Filmic/Emotional Experience**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMNKlr_MCdM



Big (1988)

1. How does this film depict challenges facing children?
2. How does this film depict the challenges facing caregivers?
3. How does this film suggest watching films like itself can help families?



The limits of independence. The limits of responsibility. A mother's worst nightmare.

Big allegorizes how family films aim simultaneously to address the individual concerns of individual family members



This function is advanced through the character of Josh, whose role differs depending on who is interacting with him



In each case, he helps these characters address family-related issues derived either from their own conduct or their families



It reminds adults to take time for children not just work, and for children not to take on responsibilities at too young an age



In so doing, it promotes the psychosocial health benefits of intergenerational leisure and recreation ... like the film itself



In Sum

Family Films became important to Hollywood in the 1980s due to a mix of demographics, technology, merchandising, and public relations

While it is often argued Hollywood echoed right-wing romanticizing of the family, Family Films tended to picture the family as deeply flawed

These films thematize the child-centered family in order to capture, and remain important to, this multi-generational cohabiting audience

To avoid alienating countless dis-functional families, they actually tend to avoid positing strident positions or unrealistic solutions to problems

Instead, they promote intergenerational understanding through the very act of consuming the films, thereby providing families a support system

Next Time ...

We will reconsider Hollywood's engagement with arguably the most prominent – and controversial – social type of the 1980s ...

Topic 5: Yuppie Cinema

Reading: Grant, “Rich and Strange”

Home Screenings: *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985)
Pretty in Pink (1986)

[Preparatory Questions on MS TEAMS and in the Syllabus]

Meeting: Thursday 14 November