Andrew Gordon

E.T. as Fairy Tale

In an article on *Close Encounters*, I criticized Steven Spielberg as a maker of irrational films, anti-science fictions.[1] *Close Encounters* was a cult movie, a wet dream of a "UFO-ologist," involving, as it does, paper-thin characters in a tissue-thin plot of mysterious appearances and disappearances and a massive governmental coverup, and concluding with an inspiring light show and the ascent into heaven of the chosen one in a chariot of the gods.

On the surface, the same thing appears to be essentially true of Spielberg's 1982 movie, *E.T.*: once again, the heroes are the childlike and pure of heart, the villains are the scientists, and the good fairies are the extra-terrestrials (E.T.'s), who possess not science but *magic*. Both movies gloss over too many holes in their plots and both end in a warm bath of wish-fulfillment about gods from outer space. Spielberg appropriates the iconography of SF, such as spaceships and alien beings, but fashions plots closer to fantasy and fairy tale.

Given the striking similarities between the two movies, why do I find myself liking *E.T.* despite myself? Why am I willing to excuse in it the same faults I deplore in *Close Encounters*?

The first reason may be that the characters in *Close Encounters* are extremely sketchy and difficult to care about, whereas those in *E.T.* are complete human beings—with the alien creature, oddly, the most human of them all. A second possibility is that *Close Encounters* is solemn and mawkish but the sentimentality of *E.T.* is nicely balanced by its sense of humor. Third, although *Close Encounters* has distinguished cinematography, in *E.T.* Spielberg is able to view the world through the visionary eyes of a child and childlike alien, thereby poeticizing the ordinary. Scene after scene has a warmth, an intimacy, and a sense of wonder created through careful lighting and camera placement: Elliott at the kitchen window, washing dishes, lost in a cloud of rising steam; Elliott moving hesitantly in the darkness, under a crescent moon, from the safe light of the house toward the strangely glowing backyard shed. This last scene has, as one critic aptly puts it, "a sacramental feel, like the discovery of the grail or the manger."[2]

The child's-eye view of the film (consistently maintained through waist-level shots) points toward the fundamental reason why *E.T.* works for me: its child hero. To watch 30-year-old Richard Dreyfuss play with his mashed potatoes is appalling; to watch 10-year-old Henry Thomas drop his pizza is appealing. *E.T.* is children's literature, whereas *Close Encounters* is simply childish.

Spielberg is not only an extremely skillful director of children but also an expert storyteller for children. He and his co-scriptwriter Melissa Mathison (who wrote *The Black Stallion*, another outstanding recent children's movie) have fashioned a contemporary fairy tale with an intuitive grasp of child psychology and added a new figure to the pantheon of pop mythology. E.T. lives in the popular psyche as surely as Peter Pan does.

Through *Close Encounters* (1977), *Poltergeist* (1982), and *E.T.* (1982), Spielberg has established himself as our wizard of the suburbs, transforming tract homes into fairy-tale cottages, bringing back some of the magic which has been leached out of our mass-produced, brand-name lives. *E.T.* is clearly the best of the three (although

its mass merchandising threatens to replace the magic with yet more commercial banality). Spielberg's films are akin to the fiction of Ray Bradbury, another poet of the fantastic, whose stories restored to small-town American life of a previous generation the dreams and nightmares of boyhood. His filmic predecessors are Frank Capra, who directed all-American, sentimental, fantastic dreams, and Walt Disney, who domesticated fairy tales for popular consumption.[3]

Spielberg's movies really belong to the suburbs of SF since they are closer to the horror story and the fairy tale. He deals not in the rationality of SF but rather in the deliberate implausibility of fantasy, the inexplicable intrusion of the extraordinary into the everyday. All his films are "creature features" in which some irrational, malevolent force (the giant truck in *Duel*, the snake-like convoy of police cars in *Sugarland Express*, the giant shark in *Jaws*, the Japanese in *1941*, the Nazis in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, or the spirits in *Poltergeist*) threatens to crush or swallow the hero, the family, the community, or even the entire world. *Close Encounters* and *E.T.* can be considered variations on the creature feature, "trick-or-treat" movies in which the menacing goblin turns into a benevolent imp.[4] As a critic of *Close Encounters* puts it, Spielberg's "UFOs consistently partake more of folklore and superstition than of alien visitation."[5] Exactly: his "extra-terrestrials" are really updated versions of the trolls, dwarfs, elves, leprechauns, and other enchanted creatures who populate folklore and fairy tales.

In the classic Grimm's fairy tale, "The Frog-King," a princess goes into the forest and, while playing with a golden ball, drops it into a well. An ugly frog promises to return the ball if she takes him home with her: "if you will love me and let me be your companion and play-fellow, and sit by you at your little table, and eat off your little golden plate, and drink out of your little cup, and sleep in your little bed."[6] In the end, as everyone knows, the frog is transformed through contact with her into a handsome prince who marries the princess. In *E.T.*, an alien visitor who is froglike in appearance, appears suddenly from out of the forest. When the boy, Elliott, tosses a ball into a dark shed in his backyard, E.T. returns it to him and symbolically binds the two of them together. Later, Elliott takes E.T. into his bedroom as his "companion and play-fellow." The parallel between E.T. and a frog is reinforced in the hilarious scene in which Elliott releases the school laboratory frogs. E.T., however, is not transformed into a human being by the boy's touch; he stays an alien. Instead, the boy is transformed by E.T.'s magical, healing touch into a more loving, mature, and whole human being than he was before—a sort of "handsome prince." As the critic Richard Corliss says, E.T. "eventually proves as beautiful as an enchanted frog," but he first must be rescued by a child "whose Galahad strength only E.T. and the moviegoer can immediately discover."[7]

According to the child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, fairy tales are not simply wish fulfillments but embody psychological truths: "While it entertains the child, a fairy tale enlightens him about himself, and fosters his personality development."[8] The fairy tale symbolizes inner conflicts and suggests how they may be resolved; thus it "reassures, gives hope for the future, and holds out the promise of a happy ending."[9]

E.T. is the most artistically successful of Spielberg's three "suburban" fantasies because it is the closest to the classic fairy-tale pattern and the most psychologically profound. *Close Encounters* gives us not the child hero of the fairy tale but an adult who behaves like a child and therefore loses our sympathies, and *Poltergeist* entirely lacks psychological growth. Any reassurance or hope for the future which these two films offer us is entirely superficial. Referring to *Poltergeist*, Pauline Kael notes that "What's lacking is what 'E.T.' has—the emotional roots of the fantasy, and what it means to the children."[10] *E.T.* is a meaningful fairy tale about a boy's psychological maturation.[11]

Bettelheim categorizes "The Frog-King" as one of a type of fairy tales which "center on the shock of recognition when that which seemed animal suddenly reveals itself as the source of human happiness."[12] This shock of recognition is also at the heart of the appeal of E.T. Spielberg's space creature is deliberately made ugly. As the director says, "He's fat and he's not pretty. I really wanted E.T. to sneak up on you—not in the easy way of an F.A.O. Schwarz doll on the shelf. The story is the beauty of his character."[13] When E.T. reveals tender emotions and other human characteristics, he makes what we ordinarily reject—the animal and the alien within us—seem suddenly human and acceptable.

And like all good fantasies, Spielberg's film not only transforms the strange into the familiar but also the familiar into the strange. Thus the extra-terrestrial E.T. is far more "human" than the really alien intruders in the film: the faceless scientists in their NASA spacesuits, the moon men who invade Elliott's home.

But E.T. is more than the Frog-King, the animal who is changed into a human being. As so many critics have mentioned, he is also a reincarnation of the modern fairy-tale hero, Peter Pan.[14] (Spielberg makes the comparison for us by including a reading from James Barrie's story in a scene in the movie.) Like Peter Pan, E.T. is a sprite who never grows up, who descends on a household of children, makes them once again believe in fairies, and teaches them to fly. And E.T. casts the same enchantment on the audience as he does on the movie's children. As Pan, E.T. is far more lovable than the Frog-King. Andrew Sarris states it succinctly: "E.T. is the teddy bear we crush forever to our bleeding hearts. E.T. is every childish fantasy we never outgrew. E.T. is the eternal child in all of us."[15]

The "eternal child" to which Sarris refers (also known as the "puer aeternus") is a mythic archetype defined by Jung as "the preconscious childhood aspect of the collective psyche." The child motif recurs in religion, folklore, myth, and fairy tale in various forms: "now a god, giant, Tom Thumb, animal, etc."[16] The child symbolizes both our past—that is, "our original, unconscious, and instinctive state"[17]—and our potential future. As such, he stands for a creative union of opposites: both old and young, wise and foolish, strong and weak. The child is "a symbol which unites the opposites: a mediator, bringer of healing, that is, one who makes whole."[18] Often, the child god is associated with Bacchus (Dionysus), god of wine and fertility, and with Eros (Cupid), god of love. He is considered a redeemer as well as a god of vegetation and resurrection.[19]

As "eternal child," E.T. encompasses aspects of both infant and god. According to Jung, the primeval child is symbolically born out of twilight or darkness from a golden egg. "To the twilight consciousness of primitive man it seems as if the egg came out of the womb of the wide world and were, accordingly, a cosmic, objective, external occurrence."[20] E.T. appears at night, out of the sky and the stars, born from an egg-shaped space vessel.

We first glimpse him in a primeval forest. Spielberg says it was his script collaborator Melissa Mathison's idea to use the forest: "at first, I thought of having the ship land in a vacant lot. But she said, 'A forest is magical...there are elves in a forest.'"[21] E.T. is a botanist, a sort of vegetation god, tenderly collecting specimens, at one with nature (later in the film he is associated with a pot of flowers). All the surrounding animals, even the timid rabbits, are unalarmed by his presence.

The mood alters abruptly with the jarring entrance of the menacing humans hunting the aliens. They disrupt the calm of nature with their noise and blinding lights. E.T. is now abandoned by his "mother ship," left totally alone on an alien planet, at the mercy of apparently ruthless men. This abandonment represents a necessary stage in the reenactment of the hero myth: "The child god is usually an abandoned foundling. Often it is threatened by extraordinary dangers...."[22] Nevertheless, the infant god traditionally possesses extraordinary hidden powers to deal

with these dangers.

As befits a mythic creature, E.T. is kept at first a mysterious figure, glimpsed only in darkness in extreme long shots or in brief close-ups of his slender hand cradling a seedling tree as he sighs and chuckles. We see the hunters (who are large, threatening silhouettes) primarily from E.T.'s point of view, but we still don't know what the creature himself looks like. We discover him at the same moment Elliott does, and the shock is mixed with humor since both human and alien respond in the same appalled manner.

Despite E.T.'s initially repellent appearance, there is something strangely familiar about him: with that small and dwarfish body, and that wizened face (large eyes, tiny nose, reptilian appearance), he resembles a fetus not yet fully formed in the womb. E.T. is a child who waddles clumsily like a toddler learning to walk and experimentally pokes and prods every object within reach, like a curious infant exploring his new world. He puts inedible objects in his mouth and tries to eat them, mistaking them for food. Again, like a baby, he is prone to upset things and cause messes. He is easily frightened, and his moods are intense but quickly changing. All these characteristics endear him to us, as if he were that most fragile and sensitive of creatures, a human infant. Spielberg is deliberately playing on the feelings of nurturance within us all.

E.T.'s progress on Earth recapitulates in compressed fashion the development of a child, starting with gestures but no words, then rapidly learning the language, and finally achieving mastery over his environment when he improvises a communicator to "phone home."

He is a child, but at the same time a respository of ancient, mystic wisdom, like the Jedi master Yoda in Irvin Kershner's *The Empire Strikes Back*. This is made clear in the comic Halloween sequence, when E.T. strays from the children to follow a trick-or-treater dressed as Yoda.

As a child who is also a divine being, E.T. descends to Earth from the heavens and mingles with the sons of men, risking his own life. He is misunderstood, hunted, captured, tormented, dies, and is reborn. His coming is, as the scientist tells Elliott, "a miracle." Associated with his divinity are his inexplicable psychic powers, such as telepathic empathy with Elliott and others, psychokinesis (the ability to move and levitate objects by mental energy), the "healing touch" of his magic finger, and, most awesome of all, the Christ-like power of resurrection: he brings first some dead flowers and then himself back to life. Moreover, like a deity, E.T. has an instinctive rapport with children, and adults must "become as little children" to understand and love him.[23]

E.T. functions as Jung's divine "bringer of light"[24]—he emerges from the darkness, but his fingertip and his heart glow—and "bringer of healing." The ads for the film emphasize his long, glowing finger, reaching out like the hand of God bringing the spark of life to Adam in Michelangelo's famous painting. With his light and his magic finger, E.T. represents the divinity as creator and healer. As the child god, he mediates and unites opposites, making whole what had been broken. By the end of the film, he has healed Elliott's broken home, united the children of a fragmented, isolating suburban development in their crusade to save him, and united scientist and layperson, adult and child, in common awe of a miraculous creature beyond their understanding. Although there is certainly a religious aspect to Spielberg's film, it is presented subtly and unobtrusively, primarily as a matter of human warmth, and not in the pretentious fashion of *Close Encounters*.

Yet the religious qualities of E.T. as "eternal child" or "child god" by no means exhaust his significance. He is what psychologists would call an "overdetermined" figure. E.T. is filled with psychological meaning for both Elliott and the audience—which further helps to account for the profound emotional impact of the film.

For Elliott, a neglected, friendless boy, abandoned by his father, a middle child squeezed between older brother and younger sister, E.T. is friend, father, sibling, and pet all rolled into one. If E.T. is the fairy-tale elf, then Elliott is the fairy-tale child: lonely, ignored, ridiculed, clumsy, but nevertheless possessing hidden powers of intelligence, resourcefulness, bravery, and love, qualities which await only the proper occasion to reveal themselves. The coming of E.T. serves to liberate Elliott's heroic potential.

Talking about the genesis of the film, Spielberg says:

> I remember wishing one night that I had a friend. It was like, when you were a kid and had grown out of dolls or Teddy bears or Winnie the Pooh, you just wanted a little voice in your mind to talk to.... To me, Elliott was always the Nowhere Man from the Beatles song. I was drawing from my own feelings when I was a kid and didn't have that many friends....[25]

Yale psychology professor Jerome Singer, commenting on the film's appeal, mentions that children often need imaginary playmates to "help them make sense in their switch from their parents to the outside world."[26] As another critic has noted, the film is a "fantasy of maturation" which "plays on the child's dream of omnipotence—the friend who is equipped with superhuman powers, but who remains dependent."[27] An alien being who is a child god perfectly fulfills these contradictory demands.

E.T. is not only the perfect childhood friend but also, in a sense, Elliott's alter ego, a magical double who completes him. They share the same initials (E.T. and Elliott Taylor) and seem part of the same character, working together like an inseparable pair linked by telepathic empathy: "a little voice in your mind to talk to." That is why the separation of the two at the end is so wrenching for the audience. But we are willing to let E.T. go, for he has served his function for Elliott, converting him from friendless loser into heroic leader, from Nowhere Man to Superman.

As the previously repressed, animal side of Elliott, E.T. also helps him to grow up by liberating his libido. Pauline Kael notes that "the telepathic communication he develops with E.T. eases his cautious, locked-up worries, and he begins to act on his impulses."[28] This liberation was part of Spielberg's strategy: "When I began making *E.T.*, I thought that maybe the thing to do was go back and make life the way it should have been. How many kids, in their Walter Mitty imaginations, would love to save the frogs or kiss the prettiest girl in class? That's every boy's childhood fantasy."[29] Such libidinal freedom has always been an aspect of the child god, who is associated with Bacchus and Eros, gods of wine, fertility, and love. We tend to forget the lascivious nature of Pan, the goat-footed demigod from whom Peter Pan derives his name.

In a sense, E.T. could even be considered as a symbol of phallic power. According to Bettelheim, the "frog-king" expresses the intitial repugnance the child feels toward sexuality.[30] Like the frog, E.T. is small, wrinkled, and ugly. His neck extends when he is excited. Elliott hides him in his bedroom, keeping him a secret from his mother but bragging about him to his peers. E.T. inspires the boy to intoxicating feats of virility in the farcical classroom scene. There, through marvellous match cutting, Elliott emulates John Wayne and sweeps the pretty blond girl into a rapturous embrace. And there is no need to mention what sense Freud would made of dreams of flying!

If E.T. is Elliott's budding manhood, then the latter part of the film could be interpreted as a nightmare of castration anxiety: the authorities (mostly male) come to sever Elliott from his E.T. But Elliott outsmarts them and finds a satisfactory resolution of the Oedipal crisis. E.T. plays dead and then comes back to life, but Elliott returns him to the womb of the "mother ship," where he will be safe from all harm.

An interviewer mentioned to Spielberg the reassuring, "mothering feeling" one

gets from the night in *E.T.*, and Spielberg replied:

> Yeah, it *is* Mother Night. Remember in *Fantasia* Mother Night flying over with her cape, covering a daylight sky? I used to think, when I was a kid, that that's what night really looked like. The Disney Mother Night was a beautiful woman with flowing, blue-black hair, and arms extended outward, twenty miles in either direction. And behind her was a very inviting cloak.[31]

E.T. ends, like *Close Encounters*, with a retreat from the dangers of masculine assertion, back into the womb of the "mother ship" and "Mother Night." *Poltergeist* merely reverses the equation, emphasizing the potentially terrifying consequences of that retreat. As Andrew Sarris notes, "the most harrowing effects in *Poltergeist* tend to be return-to-the-womb rather than phallocentric."[32] Clearly the image of the maternal night, repeated in many of his films, has a powerful psychological significance for Spielberg, dating back to his childhood, a feeling which he is able to evoke in the viewer as well. *E.T.* is a film which functions through the kind of powerfully emotive, irrational imagery of childhood, dreams, and fairy tales.

None of the interpretations I have suggested is complete or exhausts the meaning of *E.T.* Like a fairy tale, it is a maturational fantasy which recapitulates certain stages of human psychological development, encompassing both our past and our present and suggesting clues about our future. Richard Stoves, a clinical instructor in psychiatry at the Downstate Medical Center of the State University of New York, interviewed 54 New York children aged 8 to 12 immediately after they saw the film, and reports that "*E.T.* is a fairy tale for the preadolescent child."[33] But clearly the film appeals to a far broader audience than that! With its abandoned alien who is both omnipotent and dependent, its double hero, its wise children, its thrilling rescue and happy ending, this space-age fairy tale has appeal on a number of levels. Each viewer will resonate on a different psychological chord to this reassuring fantasy. For children, *E.T.* is a voyage of emotional discovery; for adults, a rediscovery of feelings we thought we had lost or outgrown. A five-year-old of my acquaintance summed it up very well: "It's a story about love." Like another filmic fairy tale, *The Wizard of Oz*, *E.T.* shows the extraordinary journey we all must take to return to the place at our heart's core: "Home."

NOTES

1. See my "*Close Encounters*: The Gospel According to Steven Spielberg," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 8 (1980):156-64.

2. Paul Joannides, "Luminous/Numinous," *London Review of Books*, 20 Jan.-3 Feb. 1983, p. 16.

3. Spielberg mentions his admiration for Frank Capra in "Sand Castles: Steven Spielberg Interviewed by Todd McCarthy," *Film Comment*, 18 (May-June 1982):56.

4. See Pauline Kael, "The Pure and the Impure," *New Yorker*, June 14, 1982, p. 119.

5. Alex Eisenstein, "The Forerunners of CE3K," *Fantastic Films*, Apr. 1978, p. 28.

6. "The Frog-King, or Iron Henry," in *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* (NY: Pantheon, 1972), p. 18.

7. Richard Corliss, "Steve's Summer Magic," *Time*, May 31, 1982, p. 56.

8. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (NY, 1977), p. 12.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

10. Kael, p. 124.

11. Amid the almost universal chorus of superlatives for *E.T.*, Andrew Sarris sounds a dissenting note which is worth considering: "Spielberg (and Lucas) may be creating fairy tales that serve not so much as rites of passage as pleas for a permanent

childhood": *Village Voice*, June 15, 1982, p. 59. And Richard Grenier, a right-wing critic, objects to "the message of *E.T.*... that except for us [Americans], it is a benign universe": *Commentary*, Aug. 1982, p. 66.

12. Bettelheim, p. 286.

13. Steven Spielberg, quoted by Charles Michener and Katrine Ames, "A Summer Double Punch," *Newsweek*, May 31, 1982, p. 64.

14. Among the critics who mention the *E.T.-Peter Pan* connection, see Sarris, p. 59; Michener and Ames, p. 63; and Corliss, p. 57.

15. Sarris, p. 59.

16. C.G. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," in *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Divine Maiden* by Jung and C. Kerenyi (NY, 1963), p. 80. I am also indebted to Professor John Cech and Patsy Lynn of the University of Florida for information about the Jungian archtype of the "eternal child" as it relates to *E.T.*

17. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

19. See Marie Louise Von Franz, *The Problem of the Puer Aeternus* (NY: 1970).

20. Jung, in Jung and Kerenyi, p. 91.

21. Steven Spielberg in "A Conversation with Steven Spielberg," by Michael Sragow, *Rolling Stone*, July 22, 1982, p. 26.

22. C. Kerenyi, in Jung and Kerenyi, p. 27.

23. See Jung, in Jung and Kerenyi, p. 88: Jung says the Christ Child is a religious necessity "so long as the majority of men are incapable of giving psychological reality to the saying: 'Except ye become as little children....'"

24. *Ibid.*

25. Spielberg, quoted by Sragow, *Rolling Stone*, p. 26.

26. Bryce Nelson, "E.T. Speaks to Children—but Not Via Telephone," *New York Times* News Service, reprinted in the *Gainesville [FL] Sun*, Dec. 21, 1982, p. 6B.

27. Joannides, p. 16.

28. Kael, p. 119.

29. Spielberg, quoted by Sragow, p. 26.

30. Bettelheim, p. 290.

31. Spielberg, quoted by Sragow, p. 26.

32. Sarris, p. 59.

33. Nelson, p. 6B.

RÉSUMÉ

Andrew Gordon. **E.T. *comme conte de fée.*** *—Il est vrai que le film de Steven Spielberg* E.T. *est aussi irrationnel que sa production précédente* Rencontres du troisième type. *C'est cependant une sorte de fiction beaucoup plus acceptable puisqu'elle relève de la littérature pour enfants alors que* Close Encounters *n'était que simplement infantile.*

E.T. *est modelé sur certains modèles classiques du conte comme "La Reine des grenouilles" et "Peter Pan" et les enfants ont sûrement vu dans E.T. une sorte de Peter Pan de l'âge spatial. Le film semble aussi relever de l'archétype jungien de l'"éternel enfant" ou de l'"enfant-dieu". À la façon d'un conte de fée,* E.T. *est une rêverie de la maturation qui récapitule certains stades du développement psychologique. Sa séduction s'exerce à différents niveaux et chaque spectateur tirera quelque chose de cette fantaisie rassurante.* (AG)

Abstract.—*Although Steven Spielberg's film* E.T. *is as irrational as his earlier film* Close Encounters, *it is a far more acceptable fantasy because it has a child hero and follows the structure of classic fairy tales.* E.T. *is children's literature, whereas* Close Encounters *is*

simply childish. Some of the fairy-tale models E.T. *is patterned after include "The Frog-King" and "Peter Pan"; children have certainly embraced E.T. as the new Peter Pan of the space age. E.T. also seems to express the mythic archetype Jung calls the "eternal child" or "child god." Like a fairy tale,* E.T. *is a maturational fantasy which recapitulates certain stages of human psychological development. It appeals on a number of different levels, and each viewer will resonate on a different psychological chord to this reassuring fantasy.* (AG)