

## ABSTRACT

JAMES DAVID LEWIS, JR. “Those Weren’t the Days: Nostalgia for the 1950s in Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, Tobe Hooper’s *Poltergeist*, and John Carpenter’s *The Thing*” (Under the direction of Professor Devin Orgeron.)

The early 1980s were a period of social upheaval and turbulence as revolutionary as the 1960s. The only difference was that it was a conservative movement concerned with a return to the values of the past. Critics note that the films of this time period reflect this shift in American culture. Yearning for the “traditional” values of the 1950s, the films of the 1980s seem to mirror the weariness felt by the American public after a long period of turmoil. Instead of challenging the status quo, these films seem to cement it firmly into place.

This project will investigate whether these critical assumptions are true. By looking at three films released in June of 1982 — Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, Tobe Hooper’s *Poltergeist*, and John Carpenter’s *The Thing* — the nostalgia for the 1950s happening in the 1980s can be fully mapped. Each of these films takes place within a space that recalls that earlier time: the suburbs and the frontier. The characters within these nostalgic spaces are acting out the concerns of the 1980s: broken families and single mothers, the shift from “hippie” to “yuppie” values, and patriarchy’s fear of equal rights for women. What this examination shows, however, is that these films do not offer the viewer either a strictly conservative or progressive viewpoint. Instead, Spielberg, Hooper, and Carpenter are offering a much more complex vision. These films are prime examples of the struggles that many men and women were experiencing in the 1980s. Like the culture in which they were made, these three films are a contradictory blending of the values of the 1950s and the 1960s.