

ESCAPING SUBURBIA: THE RETURN TO NATURE
AND THE NOBLE SAVAGE

by

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ABSTRACT

Noble Savage mythology appears in many films that depict Native Americans. In these films a character or characters will represent the wild, natural and savage side of this myth and other characters represent civilized society but also moral corruption. The natural and savage character will clash with members of civilized society and will be threatened or killed. In this paper I will show that the events and characters in some suburban films draw from these same Noble Savage myths and cultural beliefs. I will discuss these tropes in the films *E.T. The Extraterrestrial*, *The Ice Storm*, *American Beauty*, and *Ordinary People*. In these films the wild and savage side is valorized and the civilized side is denounced. I will show that this mythology has permeated into our cultural beliefs so thoroughly that it appears in films that have little to do with the original cultural, geographical and historical context that first produced this mythology.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will show that the events and characters in some suburban films draw from Noble Savage myths and cultural beliefs. Noble Savage mythology creates a dichotomy between savage and civilized people. Savage people are associated with nature, wildness, and freedom while civilized people are associated with restraint, control, western civilization and moral corruption. In these suburban narratives a character will represent the wild, natural and savage side of this myth and other characters represent civilized society but also moral corruption. The natural and savage character will clash with members of civilized society and will be threatened or killed. I will discuss these tropes in the films *E.T. The Extraterrestrial*, *The Ice Storm*, *American Beauty*, and *Ordinary People*. In these films the wild and savage side is valorized and the civilized side is denounced.

The conventional image of suburbia is of a white, middle-class neighborhood that is an alternative to the crime ridden, cramped, noisy, dirty, and corrupt urban American city. This image shows a community organized around the nuclear family. The suburbs are safe for children, the father has a stable white-collar career and leads the family, the mother raises the children, cleans the house, and occasionally has a job or career. Children walk to school, ride their bikes, and do well academically and in sports. The 1948 film *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* shows this ideal family as they move out of the city and into rural Connecticut. Mr. Blandings is the quintessential male head of the household. He is handsome, loves his wife, and has a position of authority at his office. His wife is attractive, she loves him and stays at home to care for their two

daughters. Together they survive the trials and tribulations of moving from the cramped city to a new suburban home in the countryside. The people they encounter along the way are folksy and quirky and the move is fraught with problems, but these problems are never a threat either physically or morally to the Blandings nuclear family.

In many recent films the ideal suburban community is inverted showing families that are corrupted by suburban culture. These families are unhappy or dysfunctional, the father is absent, inadequate, or at odds with his career. The mother is overworked or cold and distant, children fight with each other and neighbors don't get along with each other. Fiction films set in suburbs employ embedded cultural beliefs that are often unquestioned or unnoticed parts of that culture. Some of these fiction films draw on the myth of the Noble Savage to explain the behavior of their characters and how those characters change or conflict with each other during a film. Noble Savage mythology has historically been used to describe Native Americans or other "primitive" people. This mythology typically shows up in westerns like *Dances With Wolves* and *Last of the Mohicans* or more contemporary films like *Avatar*.

In *Dances With Wolves* Lieutenant Dunbar, played by Kevin Costner, leaves Tennessee in the middle of the Civil War to serve in the cavalry in the west. Dunbar finds himself isolated from the rest of white American culture and adopts the local Sioux culture including their language, dress, and lifestyle. At the end of the film the U.S. Cavalry threatens the Sioux community that Lt. Dunbar joined and almost hang Dunbar for desertion.

Avatar is set in the future on a fictional planet called Pandora. Sully, the hero of the film, is a paraplegic former marine who lost the use of his legs in combat and who replaces his dead brother in the Avatar Program on Pandora. In this program he operates an avatar which looks physically like the Na'vi, very large blue humanoids who are the original inhabitants of Pandora. I contend that the Na'vi are futuristic analogues for 19th century Native Americans. Sully ends up living with Na'vi through his avatar, engages in many of their social customs and learns many of their cultural beliefs. In a final showdown he fights against his employer, a large mining corporation that threatens the Na'vi.

This white male character, Lt. Dunbar in *Dances With Wolves* or Sully in *Avatar*, straddles both white civilized culture and Noble Savage culture. By living in these indigenous communities, learning their cultural beliefs and befriending their people, this character-type adopts many of the characteristics of Noble Savagery. At the same time Lt. Dunbar and Sully never fully leave the white civilization that they come from. They retain some of their original culture while adopting many of the characteristics of the indigenous population. Our beliefs about Noble Savagery and this hybrid character are not limited to films set in the old west or the future of James Cameron's imagination in *Avatar*. These beliefs about nature and culture which created Noble Savagery in the first place, persist in our cultural beliefs about modern America and suburbia and appear in films set in those places.

In this paper I discuss several films with characters who try to escape from the corruption of modern suburban society by escaping into Noble Savage mythology. These

films include *American Beauty*, *E.T. The Extra-terrestrial*, *Ordinary People*, and *The Ice Storm*. I will look at counter example, *The Burbs*, where white suburbia excludes a family of savages. I will discuss the Noble Savage myth, where this myth appears in suburban films, and how our cultural beliefs of nature persist even in places that are not considered natural.

THE MYTH OF THE NOBLE SAVAGE AND THE WHITE MEN WHO ADOPT IT

In Greek mythology the Golden Age is one of the five Ages of Man, the other four are Silver, Bronze, Heroic, and Iron. The Golden Age was a period of peace, beauty and ease where people lived without rules, laws, government or technology and in harmony with their surroundings and other people. The Iron Age was a period of decline, strife, toil and misery.

Noble Savage mythology is usually applied to Native Americans by European cultures, but it has its roots in ancient Greek mythology and the Europeans arrival and exploration of North America. In ancient Greek mythology the Golden Age was a time of peace and beauty where people didn't work hard, food was plentiful and easily harvested or collected. When Europeans first arrived in North America they couldn't understand how Native Americans lived without many of the formal European cultural institutions and customs like organized religion, centralized governmental, formal employment, and social hierarchy. These aspects of European society seemed ubiquitous and finding people who didn't have these cultural elements was hard for these early explorers to understand. To solve this problem these early European visitors simply compared Native Americans to mythical Golden Age Greeks. However they couldn't believe that Native Americans were similar or identical to their mythical ancestors so they combined these Golden Age beliefs with accounts of cannibalism or other forms of cruelty to create the Noble Savage myth.¹

¹ See Ellingson, chapters 1 and 2, for a discussion of Europeans interpretation of Native American's as contemporary Golden Age analogues.

If Native Americans were Golden Age analogues then contemporary Europeans were representatives of the Iron Age period of decline. Europeans first started to arrive in North America around the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, when people started working long hours in dirty factories and mines and when cities first started to grow into large urban centers filled with human waste, disease and slums. The arrival of Europeans in North America also coincided with the end of the Black Death which killed between 30% and 60% of the population of Europe between the 14th and 17th centuries. This contrast between European society and European's perception of Native American societies seemed to match the differences between the Golden Age and the Iron Age of Greek mythology. These two ages form the basis of the Noble Savage myth and appear in modern fiction films.

There are several traits that characterize Noble Savages in this mythology. First, those who are called Noble Savages live in harmony with nature and with each other. They have a high levels of morality and this morality or nobility is a result of their harmonious way of life and the absence of modern laws, rules, and technology. Those who come from the more “advanced” society believe that their laws, government, and professions, are the source of their moral corruption.

This myth appears in films like *Avatar*, *Dances With Wolves*, *Tarzan*, *Pocahontas*, *Crocodile Dundee*, *The Last Samurai*, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, *Out of Africa*, and *Last of the Mohicans*. In these films the Noble Savage characters live in a more natural setting without the contamination of urban society. Often a character from the more advanced society comes to live in the primitive culture and ends up changing and

partially joining the more primitive culture, for example Lt. Dunbar in *Dances With Wolves*. In these narratives this transitional Noble Savage never fully becomes the Noble Savage, but maintains elements of their original society while embracing the superior morality and environmental ethic of their adopted Noble Savage culture. In addition their original culture, the more advanced, western, capitalist, or militant society threatens the survival of the Noble Savage society and sometimes destroys it.

These Noble Savage beliefs are dependent upon a nature/culture duality. Noble Savages live in nature and the “civilized people” are a part of culture. However, in the modern United States people don't live in wild nature in the way that Native Americans did from the 16th to the 19th centuries. We don't hunt or gather our food or make clothing from resources that are caught and collected in the forest. Our homes are not made from trees that we cut down in the forest or from animals that we've killed and cleaned. Instead our connection with the natural world is mediated through the industrial production of food, housing, and clothing. This mediation separates modern Americans from the Native Americans that originally inspired this mythology.

If our culture believes that we don't live in nature anymore, it also believes that nature still exists in modern life. Physical nature has lived on metaphorically in cities, town, and suburbs and in the people who live in those places. In *Boyz In The Woods*, Andrew Light explains that wild and savage nature persist metaphorically in our beliefs about inner cities and the minority people who live there.

As European Americans came to think that nature was no longer an evil place, the classical ideal of [savage wild nature] still persisted in some rather unusual areas. The metaphorical legacy of classical wilderness is the claim that urban areas are a sort of wilderness. The primary vehicle of this

transformation is the shift of the cognitive dimension of wilderness to a focus on cities. Even though the evil physical space picked out by the term was either never really there or is at least no longer there (because, after all, it had been 'conquered'), what is 'out there' still, projected as the cognitive wilderness, is a sense of fear of a 'savage space' and its 'savage inhabitants.'

This metaphorical transformation of urban space into a kind of wilderness, through a new construction of old themes, is an interesting subversion of the original physical subject of classical wilderness that retains the overall cognitive meaning of the idea. As long as the idea is still around and recognizable, why not put it to good use? (Light, 140)

In Light's view the dark savage nature that was a threat, real or imagined, to early European colonialists in North America has persisted even after the forests, plains, mountains, and rivers were replaced with cities, towns and roads. Rather than come up with new myths, our culture has continued to employ old myths as metaphor but in an environment that no longer resembles the original. Those myths of savage and wild nature now exist in inner cities and imbue the people who live there.

Likewise Noble Savage mythology hasn't left our culture and so we continue to use this myth in places that no longer resemble the Old West or colonial America. To paraphrase Light, the idea is still around and we have certainly put it to use (Light, 140). There are echoes of the presence of Noble Savage mythology in our modern society and these echoes include people who aren't Native American or members of other indigenous groups. While modern Native Americans are still sometimes called Noble Savages or are still described using Noble Savage terminology this metaphor has expanded to include white people living in cities, towns and suburbs, who typically would be considered part of western civilization in the nature/culture duality. In *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, Ellingson describes searching the words "Noble Savage" on the internet.

“For those sites that interpret “Noble Savage” in a positive light, we might attempt a preliminary classification of the approach as being one of romantic self-affirmation. That is, the author of such a site typically says, in more or less simple or elaborate form, 'I AM a Noble Savage, and I'm proud of it!' Explanations may or may not follow the assertion; those that explain either term tend to stress elements such as integrity, intellectual curiosity and freedom, and resistance against conforming to authority.” (332)

We see this again in *Reel Injun*, a documentary about the portrayal of Native Americans in Hollywood. In one scene the filmmakers show the use of Noble Savage mythology in white children's summer camps. Children and teens walk past totem poles and white teenagers with paint on their faces and chests beat on chant, “We are Sioux! We are Sioux!” None of the teenagers in this part of the film are members of the Sioux Nation but are probably chanting this in the sense that they belong to a summer camp or a group within the camp named after the Sioux while adopting Noble Savage beliefs about what it means to be Native American. In *Reel Injun* Andre Dudemaine says, “What is interesting is, with all the bad images of the Indians, so many people want to be Indian. All the mythological apparel the cinema put around Indians, putting it in this magic land, everybody wants to be there, and one of the ways to be there was to become Indian.”

In these instances white people have adopted Noble Savage mythology, but what is interesting is that it is unusual for anyone to describe themselves as Noble Savages. Historically this is a racist myth used by Europeans and Americans to marginalize indigenous groups. This allowed these Europeans and Americans to justify theft and violence against these indigenous populations. The myth in these modern contexts has been sanitized, valorized and adopted to highlight certain positive qualities in the person who is using this myth. When it is adopted by white people it is stripped of its racist

connotations and of the power imbalance that allowed violence and theft. In this context Noble Savage mythology is left with positive attributes like nobility, honesty, integrity, connection to nature, and independence with none of the downsides like savagery, cannibalism, or other forms of violence.

These examples of white people self-describing themselves as Noble Savages or dressing up like Native American's are explicit examples of the adoption of this natural part of the Noble Savage mythology but there are more subtle examples as well. The traces of this mythology exist in many places where the cultural ideas of nature are found including human nature and physical nature that is present in suburbia.

NATURE AND CORRUPT CULTURE IN NEW CANAAN CONNECTICUT

The Ice Storm is a film about two troubled families in upper middle-class suburban Connecticut. The film is set during the Watergate scandal, President Richard Nixon appears on television in the background while one of the teenage children, Wendy Hood, rants about the nation's descent into anarchy because of Nixon's actions. During the film all of the adults commit adultery and the teenage children engage in morally and sexually questionable behavior.

This film makes a few references to Noble Savage mythology. First, when the famous Keep America Beautiful commercial, featuring Iron Eyes Cody, plays on the television. In this commercial Iron Eyes Cody paddles a traditional looking Native American birch bark canoe past large polluting industrial factories or power plants on a riverbank, then he stands by the road as trash is thrown at his feet by a passing car. Then he turns to face the camera as a single tear rolls down his cheek.

The second reference comes from the soundtrack which was composed by Mychael Danna and is performed with flutes intended to evoke Native American culture.

“I liked the irony of suggesting music endemic to Native Americans,” composer Mychael Danna has said, “to remind us that as the characters walk through the woods to their mod houses, the ground beneath their feet used to belong to civilizations that are long gone. Ang and I wanted to remind people of the power of Nature—that Nature was there before anyone else, and that Nature will be there when we’ve gone.” (Krohn, 2008)

The music that Danna composed is played in several scenes where the main characters walk through the forest near their houses. What Danna is implying in this sentence is that Native Americans are a part of, or in harmony with, the natural

environment that was here before the corruption of modern American society. The music suggests that some day this modern American corruption will end and nature will return.

In another scene Elena Hood is talking with a minister in New Canaan and sees her daughter ride a bicycle down the street. Elena says, "My daughter. I haven't been on a bike for years." She turns to the minister and says, "When was the last time you were on a bike?" A short time later Wendy is riding her bike down a road outside of town, in the background behind her there are trees and rock wall that is typical of the New England countryside. As she rides we hear the music that Mychael Danna composed which suggests Native American culture. Later Elena and Wendy talk in their kitchen.

WENDY. Hi Mom

ELENA. Hi Wendy. It's funny, when I was in town I saw you on your bike

WENDY. With Mikey?

ELENA. Who?

WENDY. Nothing

ELENA. Mikey Carver?

WENDY. We were just riding around.

ELENA. Well you looked very free when I saw you. As if I was seeing my own memories of being a girl. There's something eternal about it.

Wendy is free on her bicycle, this is a freedom that her mother doesn't have. After Elena sees Wendy on her bike Wendy rides to a drug store and shoplifts. Elena doesn't see Wendy go into this drugstore and doesn't know she shoplifted. In a later scene Elena tries to regain some of this freedom by dusting off her bicycle and riding it into town. In town Elena goes into the same drug store that Wendy went into and tries to shoplift some lipstick but is caught in the process. The freedom that Wendy has riding a bicycle is not a freedom that her mother can have.

Towards the end of the film one of the characters escapes this modern corruption by going outside in the midst of the eponymous ice storm. As Mikey puts on his jacket his younger brother, Sandy, asks him, “Where are you going?”

MIKEY. Out

SANDY. It's freezing.

MIKEY. Yeah

SANDY. Then why are you going?

MIKEY. When it freezes I guess it means that the molecules are not moving so when you breathe there's nothing in the air, you know, when you breathe into your body the molecules have stopped. It's clean.

Mikey heads outside and runs around in the fields and forest covered in snow, ice, and rain. Elijah Wood described that scene in a documentary extra, *Weathering the Storm*, included with the DVD release.

That last sequence, was such a sort of visceral and sort of beautiful sequence. There was something peaceful and beautiful about it that's sort of why he was there. No molecules, everything is clean. And it was really about the character experiencing that and sort of being free, finally for the first time. Um, not being encumbered by all the mess of the world and not being encumbered by the molecules that he speaks about in school. But being in the midst of this sort of almost alien landscape.

Mikey's escape into nature is reflective of many transitional Noble Savage characters and their escape from modern society. The Keep America Beautiful commercial is another example of this escape. Iron Eyes Cody was a first generation Italian-American, born in Louisiana and originally named Espera Oscar de Corti. He adopted the Native American identity after acting in several films as a Native American. In this sense Iron Eyes Cody is a literal transitional Noble Savage. In the Keep America Beautiful commercial Iron Eyes Cody represents the environmentally benevolent Noble Savage who cries because of all the environmental damage done by modern America. His

transformation from Italian American to Native American reflects Mikey's move from the dysfunctional household into the clean air outside. When Mikey wanders out into the snow storm he is returning to the natural world and to the ancient civilizations that Danna describes when he describes his musical score. Mikey is also escaping from the adultery, the Watergate scandal, and other elements of a morally inferior America in the 1970's. But like Iron Eyes Cody he can't fully escape. While he is wandering around in the storm he is electrocuted by a downed power line and killed, a moment that is a metaphor for the genocide of Native Americans and their way of life in the 19th century as well as the pollution that is thrown at the feet of Iron Eyes Cody in the Keep America Beautiful Commercial. The message is that you can't escape modernity with it's pollution, destruction and immorality.

In this film there isn't a Noble Savage community to escape to in the way that Lt. Dunbar escapes to the Sioux in *Dances With Wolves* or Sully escapes to the Na'vi in *Avatar*. When Mikey escapes from his family and community into the ice storm he isn't adopted by a local Native American community that shows him how to live without rules and in a more spiritual or ethical manner. Instead Mikey escapes by adopting some of the characteristics of Noble Savage mythology at the end of the film. He escapes into nature to breath the clean air molecules and away from the suburban society of New Canaan.

THE ECOLOGICAL MONSTER IN *E.T.*

There are two important elements of Noble Savage mythology that appear in *E.T. The Extra-terrestrial*; monstrosity and the Ecological Noble Savage. The Ecological Noble Savage places particular emphasis on the harmonious connection to the land, nature and wildlife that the surrounds these Noble Savages. While conventional Noble Savage mythology suggests that Noble Savages live in harmony with nature Ecological Noble Savages are stewards that maintain wild nature, akin to a gardener tending a wild garden. They prevent its exploitation and destruction, and encourage its diversity and wildness.

Monsters are a cultural construction, they are hybrids between human and animal, between the familiar and unfamiliar, they cannot be easily categorized as either. They occupy the edge of human culture, they represent transgression and abnormality. They contain elements that a society values and abhors, they represent danger and are feared and they trigger extralegal attacks and violence from the society that creates them. Monstrosity is an important part in the Noble Savage mythology, the term combines two words which negate each other, a person cannot be both a savage and also a member of nobility at the same time. This combination of terms affords the people who use it a number of options for dealing with a Noble Savage; if the savage qualities are emphasized then violence is justified and if the noble qualities are emphasized then gentler actions are warranted.

In *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, E.T. is the Ecological Noble Savage, the monster hybrid messiah. He straddles both sides of monstrosity at the same time and this position

in our society justifies both friendly and hostile behavior depending on who he encounters. He is feared by the adult world that includes Elliot's mom and the government that is hunting him, but E.T. is not feared by the child world that Elliot and his siblings are part of or by the viewers who sympathize with Elliot.

Like all monsters E.T.'s characteristics are a combination of the familiar and unfamiliar. His bodily proportions suggest extreme intelligence, something our culture values, but also physical weakness. His head is disproportionately large to his body and he has feet which seem almost useless, his arms and hands are feeble. His DNA has six nucleotides as opposed to the four that make up all known life forms implying advanced evolution. However his physical weakness is countered by his mental strength, he can lift objects with his mind, cure injuries by touching them, bring dead plants back to life, and make an intergalactic communicator using a saw blade, a record player, an umbrella, a fork, and a Talk n' Text. Many of his attributes are valued in a society that believes in evolution, progress, technology, and intelligence but his physical appearance is still unfamiliar and frightening.

In most films monsters are feared by the community that lives near the monster. *E.T.* contests this trend by making viewers identify with E.T. and not with the adult suburban community and government that fears E.T. Elliot's mother Mary is terrified of him, the government is hunting him, he is hidden from everyone except Elliot, Gertie and Mike, and, when E.T. is discovered the government isolates him in Elliot's house and performs tests on him. When Elliot and his brother Mike escape with E.T. the police and

government agents try to hunt them down rather than letting them escape. E.T. appeals to us, the viewers, but he is still a monster to the suburban community.

E.T. is also an ecological Noble Savage or an ecological monster. E.T.'s ship is a technological wonder capable of powered flight, rising from the earth and traveling through outer space like most other sci-fi spacecraft, but this ship is far different from the spaceships that we usually see. This ship is full of glowing mushrooms and other plants, it's a natural and technological hybrid. When E.T. and the other aliens come to Earth they choose to land in the forest outside of suburbia, and when they arrive they don't try to invade and destroy humanity, they collect plants. They're also not here to clear cut forests or steal clean water to resupply their own beleaguered and abused planet, they just want to collect some samples.

E.T.'s spaceship and behavior are an example of complex pastoralism, or the idea that technology and nature can enhance each other, that is described by Leo Marx. In *The Machine In The Garden* Leo Marx identifies two types of pastoralism, simple and complex. Simple pastoralism is based on the ideas of the Golden Age of Greek mythology and Eden, or the idea of people can live in harmony with nature on farms and without heavy industry. Marx writes that this idea of simple pastoralism collided with the industrial revolution and American industrial progress in the nineteenth century. The result was complex pastoralism or the idea that nature will be more accessible and can be enhanced through the creations of the industrial revolution, for example, by trains. Marx quotes Emerson and his view of railroads and industry,

The new roads, steamboats, and railroads – especially the railroads – annihilate distance and, “like enormous shuttles,” pattern the various

threads of American life into one vast web... "Railroad iron is a magician's rod," says Emerson... "in its power to evoke the sleeping energies of land and water"...Like a divining rod, the machine will unearth the hidden graces of landscape. (Marx, 234)

Emerson's view is that the landscape is an Edenic space that will be opened up to all Americans by the industrial revolution, specifically the railroad. These railroads will allow people to escape the dirty and noisy confines of American cities into the welcoming space of rural pastoral America. E.T.'s spaceship is a combination of space age technology with wild nature. This combination establishes E.T.'s technological, moral and environmental superiority. The plant life demonstrates the necessity of other forms of life that may be discounted or replaced in suburban society. The plants that we see are glowing mushrooms and other plants that would not be a part of suburban society. They are not organized in pots or planted in rows, they seem to have no order at all, as if they were growing on the forest floor that just happens to be inside a spaceship piloted by large brained primates.

Complex pastoralism is based on the idea that cities are dirty, noisy and unpleasant and that technology will get us beyond them to the countryside because we need the natural environment. Likewise E.T.'s spaceship seems to also suggest that interplanetary travelers also need the natural environment, but instead of using the spaceship to travel to nature, they're using nature to enhance the spaceship. These advanced aliens give credence to the belief that advanced civilizations need nature and are advanced in part because they hold this belief. This suggests that if we want to be an advanced society, either technologically or culturally, we also need to incorporate wild nature into our daily lives and modern technology.

While E.T. and his spaceship represent complex pastoralism, the same cannot be said of suburban California where Elliot lives. During the film E.T. and Elliot become telepathically connected to each other, both emotionally and physiologically. In a scene where Elliot is at school in science class and E.T. is at home watching television and drinking beer, E.T. gets drunk and Elliot slumps in his chair. When E.T. watches a romantic film, Elliot looks lovingly at the cute girl in the next row. During this scene we see that E.T. wants to return home when he watches a movie showing a spacecraft and sees a cartoon with someone calling for help on an alien planet. At the same time Elliot is sitting in a science class that is about to kill a bunch of frogs by poisoning their air so they can be dissected. Elliot, while thinking and feeling what E.T. is thinking and feeling, then goes on a frog prison break while yelling, "Run to the river, back to the forest! I want to save you! Let's get out of here! I got to let him go! I've got to save him!" E.T. in the suburbs has been metaphorically connected to the frogs in their kill jars. Elliot is saving the frogs from death in the name of science, and from the hostile landscape that they are both in. As mayhem ensues in the classroom, the children release the frogs through open windows and doors. Before the classroom was an orderly place under the direction of an adult science teacher. After Elliot's actions, chaos breaks out and the frogs are freed from the hostile world. The metaphor of the frog in a glass jar can be seen again when the government scientists, like the science teacher directing a science experiment, enclose the family house in air tight plastic. Like the frogs in their glass jars, E.T. is dying inside. Like the frogs, Elliot is trying to free him from the technological and poisonous environment of suburbia. It is never quite clear whether it is the air that is killing E.T., the

social atmosphere, the absence of a natural environment, or some other problem, but it is clearly the environment of suburban California is poisonous to E.T. He needs to escape.

E.T.'s complex pastoralism is different from the environmental destructive behavior of suburban California. E.T.'s spaceship, on a botany trip, with glowing mushrooms and other plants lands in the forest outside of the suburbs. At one point they see a rabbit hopping in the forest and leave it alone. Later in the film when E.T. sends a signal back to his spaceship, he sends it from a clearing in the forest, not from Elliot's house or some other urban space. On the other side we see Keys and the other government agents who arrive in large trucks driving aggressively and stopping abruptly right before the camera. The agents trucks emit exhaust, they stomp through the forest with their heavy boots, and chase E.T. with flashlights. Towards the end of the film, when Elliot is escaping from his house with E.T., Mike and his friends flee through a suburb that is under construction to get from the existing suburbs that Elliot lives in, to the forest where E.T.'s spaceship is landing, suggesting development that is encroaching upon the forest.

There is never an overt message of environmental destruction, we don't see air or water pollution, coal mines, factories releasing toxins into the environment, or protesters at an environmental rally. E.T. embodies a general ethic that is more benign and connected with nature instead of destructive and harmful. This environmental ethic is the same as the belief that Native Americans are environmentally stewards or were before Europeans started colonizing North America.

THE INCORRIGIBLE LESTER BURNHAM

Part of Noble Savage mythology is the belief that laws and norms are a corrupting influence on people and those who live without these influences are morally superior. In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes wrote that a strong central authority is necessary to keep people from fighting each other. To Hobbes the Leviathan meant a strong monarchy although the Leviathan can be any form of strong sovereign power. Modern sovereign power uses police, the court system, lawyers, laws, and government to create and enforce laws that keep people from fighting each other. This system of rules and laws does not stop at the level of the police and courts, but extends down to each individual and member of society. “The eighteenth century, or the Classical Age, also set up a State apparatus that extended into and was supported by different institutions.” This apparatus of government is directed towards “something that we can call 'normalization.' (Foucault, *Abnormal* 49)” Normalization occurs at every level of society; in schools, army barracks, the church, the workplace, and the family. Discipline is the process of normalization (Foucault, *Abnormal* 49). This is where societies laws and rules, the laws and rules that are immoral in Noble Savage mythology, are enforced upon its members to create normal behavior.

In *Abnormal* Foucault states that the “individual to be corrected” is the incorrigible. A person who will not conform to standards of normality despite disciplinary techniques used to create conformity in a group (Foucault, *Abnormal* 58). Disciplinary power is not sovereign power, it is not a form of correction that can be sourced to one person or central authority, instead it is diffused across and within disciplinary bodies like

schools, the workplace, military barracks, a family, or church among many other possible social groups. In *American Beauty* the goal of this discipline is the normalization of the family and the individual into the image of success.

American Beauty is about the Burnham family, the parents, Lester and Carolyn and their teenage daughter Jane. Next door live the Fitts family, retired colonel Frank Fitts, his wife Barbara, and their son Ricky. Angela is Jane's best friend in high school and the object of Lester's attractions. Carolyn is a real estate agent and works hard at her job and at her appearance. Lester hates his life, hates his job at a magazine and barely seems to get along with his wife and daughter. Jane is an insecure teenager who's insecurities seem to be exacerbated by Angela bragging about her extensive sexual encounters. All of this changes when the Fitts family moves in next door and Lester starts smoking weed that he buys from Ricky. This makes Lester nostalgic for his past so he quits his job, sells his car, starts lifting weights, and buys a 1970 Pontiac Firebird.

Lester, Carolyn, and Jane are supposed to be the ideal suburban nuclear family. We see this ideal suburban family in *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* where Mr. Blandings is the sovereign head of the family at the top of a hierarchy, what Foucault calls a "pyramidal organization" or a system of disciplinary power. Mr Blandings stands at the top of this pyramid, followed by his wife Muriel and his closest friend Bill, then his children and the architect, and on down to the maid, the secretary, the contractors who do the construction, drill the well, and dig the foundation of their dream house. This pyramid creates a system of disciplinary power that enforces normalization. This enforcement

starts at the top and continues down the chain to the base of the pyramid. This is the stereotypical hierarchy of suburban family life in movies and television.

In *American Beauty* Lester should be the head of the household and the head of his workplace, Carolyn should be the attractive wife who is successful at work and in raising Jane and Jane should be the attractive teenage daughter and the dutiful student. That's the way it should be according to the logic of *Mr Blandings Builds His Dreamhouse*, but this hierarchy is turned on its head in *American Beauty*.

The person who is at the top of the pyramidal organization, or the top of the hierarchy in this film, is Buddy Kane, the “King of Real Estate.” Buddy is direct competition for Carolyn's real estate business and the opposite of Lester. He sits at the top of the power hierarchy and establishes what normality should look like. He projects an image of success, a success that Carolyn tries to imitate. He stands at the head of a party and above all the other guests with his attractive, younger, trophy wife, he leads sales in the local real estate market, he drives a Jaguar, he is the quintessential all-American former high school football captain turned local businessman. Carolyn looks up to Buddy, and his image of success pushes Carolyn to conform to his standard, to drive the right car, have the right sofa, to fertilize her roses with eggshells, wear garden clogs that match her pruning shears, and play Lawrence Welk music during dinner. Carolyn pressures Lester and Jane into the image of success that Buddy represents in her pursuit of his standard. She upbraids Jane for “trying to look unattractive” and Lester for running late, smoking weed, quitting his job, trading his car for a Firebird, and for being a bad father.

Fear drives the normalizing process. Carolyn disciplines Lester and Jane because their behavior reminds Carolyn of her own failure to attain normality. Carolyn's failure to sell a house parallels Lester's failure at his career. Fear of abnormality makes Col. Fitts, beat his son for being gay when Col. Fitts is the one who is gay and fear makes Angela tell everyone about all the men she's slept with even when she hasn't slept with anyone. Fears of their own abnormality make them create images of normality that they try conform to. Angela wants to be so attractive that everyone wants to sleep with her. Col. Fitts fears exclusion from a straight community so he becomes blatantly and violently homophobic. In all of these cases the normality that these characters are trying to achieve is illusory.

Initially Lester is a slovenly, lethargic, and unassertive man. His wife pushes him around, his daughter pushes him around, work pushes him around and he does not put up a fight or resist this treatment. He is the opposite of Buddy Kane. Initially both the viewer and the suburban community look down upon him. As viewers we reject Lester, the oafish schlub worker drone, who is subservient to his wife and daughter, who sleeps in the back of the car while his wife drives and his daughter rides shotgun. We reject the Lester who would rather watch the James Bond marathon on television instead of watching daughter cheerleading during a basketball game. But over the course of the narrative Lester turns his life around, not by becoming a Buddy Kane clone, but by becoming an incorrigible. He opposes the image of success that Buddy Kane represents as well as directly opposing his wife. He quits his job and blackmails his boss, he lifts weights, smokes weed, buys a hot rod, pursues a teenage girl, doesn't care if he spills beer

on the Italian sofa, and doesn't care what Buddy Kane thinks of him. As viewers we applaud his rejection of the social rules that have been enforced upon him and his family. As viewers we recognize that those social rules are unnecessarily restrictive and interfere with the lives that these characters could be living. Lester's rejection of these social rules makes him an incorrigible, or the "individual to be corrected. (Foucault, *Abnormal* 49)" We revere the incorrigible Lester who refuses to conform to the suburban society that he lives in.

At best the cost of incorrigibility is expulsion but often the cost is death. Lester rejects the immoral social constraints of modern society to achieve more personal freedom. Like more conventional Noble Savage characters, there are only two possibilities for Lester and they are death or banishment. "If incorrigibles there be, one must be determined to eliminate them." (*Discipline and Punish*, 107) In the suburban films that I describe those who escape from or resist the constraints of suburbia often face death. Ricky Fitts is beaten and forced out of his family's house, Jane promises to go with Ricky to New York City, and Lester is killed. In *E.T. The Extra-terrestrial* E.T. dies although he is brought back to life and in *The Ice Storm* Mikey Carver is electrocuted. *Ordinary People* inverts this trend when Beth is forced out while Conrad and Calvin remain in the home. In films that more explicitly employ the Noble Savage myth, Jake Sully is nearly killed and Grace is killed in *Avatar*. In *The Last Samurai* the samurai warriors are all wiped out in a battle of swords against guns. In *Dances With Wolves* John Dunbar is captured and nearly executed. He is rescued but is forced from the Sioux

homeland and both history and the closing text tell us that his future and the future of the Sioux is dim.

The history of Native Americans in the United States follows this same pattern of normalization, incorrigibility and violence. Initially the cultural construction of Native Americans as monsters under the description “Noble Savage” allowed all kinds of extralegal attacks, from forced removal from tribal lands to outright massacres. Once the American Indian Wars were over the process of assimilation and normalization continued. Even when they were forced onto reservations their traditional cultural customs made them incorrigibles in the eyes of white Americans. Policies of cultural assimilation allowed Americans to set up boarding schools where Native American children were forced to speak English, study standard academic subjects, attend church, cut their hair, and leave behind all Native American customs.

LIVING IN HARMONY, THE NOBLE SAVAGE, FAMILY AND FEELINGS

Noble Savage communities, according to this myth, exhibit the same harmony between members that they share with their surroundings. Golden Age and Edenic mythology depicts people who live in harmony with each other in a utopian vision where conflict doesn't exist. This utopian vision appears in two conventional Noble Savage films, *Avatar* and *Dances With Wolves*. In *Avatar* the Na'vi live in a large communal tribe inside of a gigantic twisting tree. They are all connected to each other by "Eywa" which is "their deity. The Great Mother. The goddess made up of all living things." (Cameron, 53) The domesticated animals in *Avatar* have an antennae that the Na'vi riders connect to with their "queue" which looks like long braided hair on the backs of the Na'vi's heads and what James Cameron defines as "a neural-link with which they can command the horse." (Cameron, 44) When Sully first climbs on top of a direhorse, as the science fiction horses that populate Pandora are called, and connects to it through his queue Neytiri tells him, "This is shahaylu – the bond. Feel her heartbeat, her breath. Feel her strong legs. You may tell her what to do, [pointing to her head] inside."

Emotional connection is also an important theme in *Dances With Wolves*. After several days hunting bison together, the Sioux leave Lt. Dunbar alone at his army camp. Dunbar says in voice over, "I'd never known a people so eager, so devoted to family, so dedicated to each other. And the only word that came to mind was harmony. Many times I've felt alone, but until this afternoon I'd never felt completely lonely." This emotional connection also extends to his horse. He is personally attached to his horse and the horse reciprocates in two separate scenes by throwing members of the Sioux tribe who try to

steal it from Dunbar. Towards the end of the film Dunbar is more concerned for his dying horse than for his own safety when it's shot by the US Cavalry. In these Noble Savage films the relationships between families and tribe members is harmonious.

The Jarrett family disrupt the clean domestic image of the suburban family in *Ordinary People*. They are not well and exhibit characteristics that are the opposite of the Noble Savages in *Avatar* or *Dances With Wolves*. Conrad's relationship with his mother is troubled. In a scene between Beth and Conrad, Beth is sitting in the bedroom of her dead son Buck when Conrad steps into the doorway and startles Beth.

CONRAD. Oh, I'm sorry

BETH. Don't do that!

CONRAD. I'm sorry

BETH. I didn't think you were here

CONRAD. Sorry I just got in. I didn't know you were here

BETH. I didn't play golf today, it's too cold

CONRAD. How was your golf game?

BETH. I didn't play

CONRAD. Oh, it did get colder today

BETH. No I mean for the year, it's colder. Weren't you swimming today

CONRAD. Uh huh. Yeah sorry I scared you

BETH. How'd it go

CONRAD. Good, I swam well today

BETH. Good

CONRAD. Personally I think I could swim the 50 if my timing...

BETH. Off [Beth scolds Conrad for leaning against a wardrobe]

CONRAD. ...got better. I'm just a little, a little off on my timing

BETH. Well you have to work at that. (Beth turns to go into her bedroom)

CONRAD. Oh, I got seventy four on a trig quiz

BETH. Seventy four, gee I was awful at trig

CONRAD. Oh, yeah, did you, you took trig?

BETH. Wait a minute... did I take trig?... [thinking] I bought you two shirts they're on your bed

Then Beth turns and closes her bedroom door leaving Conrad standing on the landing and staring at the closed door. They don't know how to talk to each other, neither listens to the

other, their conversation is similar to the formalities and pleasantries that you might exchange with a vague acquaintance at a party if you are obliged to talk with them. Beth in particular doesn't seem to know how to talk with Conrad. They lack the harmony and emotional connection that we see between members in *Avatar* or *Dances With Wolves*. This is a repeating theme in suburban films including *E.T.*, *The Ice Storm*, and *American Beauty*. In *E.T.* Elliot is alienated from his own family including his mother, in *The Ice Storm* all of the characters are alienated from each other and engage in inappropriate sexual behavior in the vain hope of achieving some kind of connection, and in *American Beauty* the members of the Burnham family are unable to relate to each other.

Ordinary People is about a troubled teenager, Conrad, who lives in Lake Forest, an upper middle class suburb of Chicago, and who attempted suicide after his brother died in a boating accident on Lake Michigan. After his suicide attempt Conrad starts seeing a therapist, Dr. Berger, and in these therapy sessions we see Conrad's problems with his family and the dichotomy in this film between feelings and emotional connection versus control, order and isolation.

The community of Lake Forest is a clean, well organized and orderly community. All the lawns are properly mowed, the parks look nice, the houses look the way nice upper middle class houses are supposed to. Inside the homes are well kept, everything is in its proper place. This order extends to the citizens of this community and to Conrad's mother, Beth, in particular. On the other side is Dr. Berger, who has a hint of disorder to him. When Conrad first visits his office he rings the office doorbell only to have Dr. Berger emerge from the door behind him. When Conrad enters his office Dr. Berger is

trying to fix his stereo, he gives up after a few seconds and turns to Conrad only to have the stereo start playing Beethoven unprompted which makes Dr. Berger jump up and pull the plug on the stereo. In their first conversation Dr. Berger is casual, relaxed and leaning back in his chair while smoking a cigarette. When Conrad doesn't let on that anything is actually bothering him, Dr. Berger asks him why he's come to his office and what it is that he would like to change.

CONRAD. I told you I'd like to be more in control

DR. BERGER. Why?

CONRAD. I told you so people can quit worrying about me

DR. BERGER. Well I'll tell you something. I'll be straight with you OK.

I'm not big on control. But it's your money.

The next scene is set in Conrad's house. Beth is arranging napkins with napkin rings, properly in a drawer in the dining room. There is a strong contrast between Dr. Berger and his disorder versus Beth's need for control and order. While Dr. Berger isn't concerned with appearances, proper behavior, and dismisses control, Beth must maintain appearances, control her feelings and have everything in the proper place.

The film makes the argument that what caused Conrad to attempt suicide is the order and control of upper middle class suburban Chicago. In western philosophy there is a dichotomy between human emotion and control, these two are treated as opposites that conflict with each other. If someone is emotional then they cannot be logical, rational, orderly or exhibit self control, and vice versa. This distinction between emotion and control appears in a therapy session between Dr. Berger and Conrad, Dr. Berger says, "Look, remember the contract? Control, well maybe there's some connection between control and, what do we call it? Lack of feeling." Beth's lack of feeling appears in the

penultimate scene where Beth's husband Calvin, who has been sitting in the dining room crying late at night and who has also gone to talk with Dr. Berger, asks Beth:

CALVIN. Tell me something. Do you love me? Do you really love me?

BETH. I feel the way I've always felt about you.

[...]

CALVIN. I don't know what we've been playing at. So I was crying.

Calvin is overcome by sadness

CALVIN. I don't know if I love you anymore. And I don't know what I am going to do without that.

Beth does not know what to say or do. She turns away and goes upstairs.

INT. BEDROOM – NIGHT

Beth enters, kind of reflects, then goes [to] open a closet, takes out some luggage. A sudden burst of emotion overcomes her, she cries but does not seem to identify the emotion, then restrains it. (Sargent, 123)

Not only does Beth control her emotions to the point where she doesn't have them, this control also isolates her from others. In the final therapy session between Dr. Berger and Conrad we get the opposite interaction:

DR. BERGER. Feelings are scary and sometimes they're painful and if you can't feel pain then you're not going to feel anything else either. Do you know what I'm saying? You're here and you're alive and don't tell me you don't feel that.

CONRAD. It doesn't feel good

DR. BERGER. It is good. Believe me

CONRAD. How do you know?

DR. BERGER. Because I'm your friend

CONRAD. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been here.

You're really my friend?

DR. BERGER. I am. Count on it

Conrad falls into Dr. Berger's arms, crying. (Sargent, 115)

Dr. Berger falls on the emotional side of the emotion versus control dichotomy.

More than Conrad's therapist, he is also his friend and when Conrad starts crying Dr.

Berger hugs him instead of just offering him a tissue. This emotional connection is part of

Dr. Berger's less controlled behavior and sets him apart from the upper middle class community where Conrad lives.

The regulated society in *Ordinary People* is the upper middle class community of Lake Forest where Conrad's brother died in a boating accident and Conrad attempted suicide because he felt guilty for surviving that accident. Conrad's suicide attempt and his brother's death reflect Lt. Dunbar's attempted suicide, Sully's paralysis, Sully's brothers murder, and conflict of colonial America in the 17th century. Conrad and Calvin change to accept Dr. Berger's more natural, primitive, uncontrolled, and emotional ways over the course of the film and likewise Sully and Lt. Dunbar also accept the more primitive and uncontrolled ways of their adopted communities.

Like *Ordinary People*, we also see the emotional alienation in *E.T.* where Elliot is marginalized in his own family, stuck in the middle between his younger sister and older brother. As the middle child he is ignored by his older brother Mike and Mike's friends. His younger sister Gertie, is too young to be a companion and is also so young that she occupies all of their mother's time that isn't already taken up by her work. Also their father has run off to Mexico with another woman. But E.T. and Elliot form a telepathic bond which is greater than his connections to the other members of Elliot's family. Elliot can feel what E.T. is feeling and gets sick when E.T. does. At the same time Elliot's mother, Mary, is so busy from work that she doesn't even notice that there's an alien living in her house, even when she hits him in the face with the refrigerator door. In these films isolation and a lack of emotional connection are a product of civilization which

creates disharmony. Likewise emotions connect the Sioux in *Dances With Wolves*, the Na'vi in *Avatar*, E.T. and Elliot, and Dr. Berger, Conrad and Calvin.

HUMAN NATURE IN SUBURBIA

Some of the films that I describe have specific references to nature. E.T. is associated by his behavior and through his spaceship with nature and with being more natural than the suburban residents that live around Elliot and his family. This physical return to nature doesn't explain Conrad and Calvin in *Ordinary People* or Lester Burnham in *American Beauty*. None of these characters make a return to nature; they don't take up hunting or backpacking, or move to a cabin in the woods. These characters do transition to what our culture believes is more natural human behavior. Our beliefs about nature extend to human behavior and it is commonly believed that human behavior can be either natural or unnatural.

All human activity is not unnatural, only that activity which goes beyond our biological and evolutionary capacities... In this sense, then, human actions can also be judged to be natural – these are the human actions that exist as evolutionary adaptations, free of the control and alteration of technological processes. (Katz 1997, 104)

Pop-cultural beliefs about evolution can delineate what types of behavior are natural and which one's are not. If humans exhibited certain behaviors before technology and modern culture then it would be reasonable to assume that this must be natural. In *The Caveman Mystique*, Martha McCaughey argues that popular culture representations of evolution and evolutionary psychology support cultural beliefs that humans are descendent from cavemen and that boorish, rude, and sexually aggressive behavior is part of natural human male behavior. “The caveman mystique is a vision of male physical and social power over women, of male efficaciousness, male confidence, male strength, male pride, and male power. Pop culture celebrates male heterosexuality as irrepressible and

pop-Darwinism is its method.” (McCaughey, 64) Lester's pursuit of Angela is just his return to his more caveman self. Society, the law, and common sense tell us that a middle aged man pursuing his teenage daughters best friend is wrong, but pop cultural evolutionary psychology tell us that he's just maximizing his reproductive potential as in this quotation from Men's Health Magazine.

In the environment that crafted your brain and body... the only thing that counted was that your clever neocortex – your seat of higher reason – be turned off so that you could quickly select a suitable mate, impregnate her, and succeed in passing your genes to the next generation....the reason men of any age continue to like young girls is that we were designed to get them pregnant and dominate their fertile years by keeping them that way... When your first wife has lost the overt signals of reproductive viability, you desire a younger woman who still has them all. (Men's Health Magazine. Qtd in McCaughey, 4)

We see Lester's caveman self again when Lester tries to seduce Carolyn after she comes home to discover Lester's new Pontiac Firebird. LESTER. "Have you done something with your hair, you look great." Carolyn asks where Jane is, Lester replies, "Jane not home." He moves next to her on the sofa. "We have the whole house." This dialogue evokes the cliché pidgin from the Tarzan films, "Me Tarzan, you Jane." His pursuit of Angela and his dialogue with Carolyn are his return to his more caveman self without the social constraints that would have limited him before.

But the nature in *American Beauty* doesn't begin with Lester's sexual pursuits, it begins in the neighborhood around the Burnhams. Suburbs are known for being homogeneous nowhere lands, a bland commercialized space designed to replicate Arcadia. This replication is enforced as the unique wildlife and other natural features of the landscape are removed and replaced by stereotyped expectations of what suburbia is

supposed to look like. The artificial nature of suburbs and their enforcement are evident in *The Truman Show* when, late in the film, Truman tries to escape in the middle of the night. While the cast and crew are searching for Truman, Cristof orders his staff to “cue the sun,” to turn on the artificial sun in the middle of the night so they can find Truman more easily.

“Christof’s order—and the wee-hours sunrise that follows—makes plain the utter artificiality of Truman’s universe, while at the same time highlighting the forces massed to keep Truman in his place. Read metaphorically, this sequence in Weir’s film depicts suburbia not only as an artificial reconstruction of small-town America but also, more tellingly, as a landscape of imprisonment and control.”

In *American Beauty* the street that the Burnham's live on is Robin Hood Trail.

This is an ironic name because there is nothing about this street that resembles Sherwood Forest and no one who behaves like Robin Hood. The landscape of control, the same control that is described by Foucault when he talks about normalization in *Abnormal*, can be seen in Carolyn's yard where she grows the perfect roses. We hear again about Carolyn's normalization when Lester complains that Carolyn cut down the neighbors sycamore tree. In this situation the sycamore tree was an incorrigible that had to be cut down the way that all incorrigibles are killed. This unnatural nature bares no resemblance to the original environment that would have existed before Robin Hood Trail came along. It is ordered, all the trees grow in rows, the grass is groomed and maintained, there is little undergrowth or bushes and no wildlife. The nature that remains includes only a small percentage of the original species that would have been there. What is missing is the wildness; the trees, grasses, animals, and shrubs that grow and live outside of ordered rows and the diversity of species that have been excluded from what is acceptable in

suburbia. Metaphorically the discipline, control and normalization that is enforced to give the appearance of acceptability in suburbia occurs with both people and all other forms of life that might exist in the suburbs.

The wildness that is missing from the suburbs is never replaced by wild animals and an untamed forest. Instead we have Lester's incorrigibility and his Pontiac Firebird. In the nature/culture binary a Pontiac Firebird isn't a natural object; it's made of metal, plastic, rubber, and electrical wiring. But it is a symbol of wildness. A Pontiac Firebird, a muscle car, symbolizes male strength, freedom, the open road, wildness, and independence; these are the ideals of the frontier western, the escape to freedom. Lester's pursuit of Angela and his new Pontiac Firebird show his more caveman self and the wildness that is missing from the nature of the suburban neighborhood and this is Lester's escape from the ordered control of suburbia.

CONCLUSION

American suburbia appears to have little in common with 16th to 19th century North America. It seems to have even less to do with the perceived cultural differences between Native Americans and Europeans during that time period. However as Light pointed out, these myths about people, nature, and culture persist even as the physical suburban location no longer resembles the wild original. The persistence of this myth in modern films about Native Americans and its appearance in suburban films demonstrates just how far this mythology has permeated into our culture.

When this mythology appears it is important to understand what is being said about certain demographic groups or about the intrinsic worth of natural environments, cities, towns, and suburbs. In Light's analysis of the film *Falling Down* he shows that our culture views the inner city and most importantly, the people living there, with the same fear and apprehension that early Europeans viewed the wild forests of colonial North America. The original dark and dangerous forest has been transposed into the urban city creating an urban jungle full of gang members, hoodlums and unfamiliar minorities.

The suburbs in the films I cite are characterized by social alienation, outward appearances, career climbing, disaffected white-collar office workers, aloof mothers, and materialism. The racist side of this mythology is gone since all of the characters are white, but this mythology is flexible and these films still malign a segment of our population. Women represent the civilized side of this Noble Savage and civilization binary and they aren't well portrayed. Both Carolyn Burnham and Beth Jarrett are more concerned with personal appearance and order than with the feelings or well being of

their families. In another film that uses this mythology, *The Virgin Suicides*, the mother, Mrs. Lisbon, is also very controlling and emotionally aloof. Even Elliot's mother in *E.T.* is too busy working and raising a family to pay attention to Elliot and the events in his life. In a Hollywood film system that privileges men and marginalizes women this is a likely outcome when this mythology is put to use in a modern setting.

Changing cultural beliefs mean that anyone could be portrayed negatively in this kind of nature/civilization binary. This list includes minorities, Native Americans, women, white people, men, the military, and schools. The possibilities are almost endless. It is important for viewers and filmmakers alike to understand the possible representations that can appear in a film to understand how certain groups can be maligned.

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