Thusser’s thesis that schools form part of what he calls ideological state apparatuses (132–133). Given this kind of education, it is not surprising that the government agents and scientists do not pay any heed to E. T.’s needs and desires, but instead simply try to capture, immobilize, and exploit him in order to gain new knowledge. Accordingly, when the scientists finally get their hands on the alien, they do not hesitate to link him up to their machines and to isolate him from Elliott, his only friend – just as the industrial laborer’s experience of mechanized work often isolates him or her from fellow workers. In short, inured to scientific violence through years of training and therefore no longer knowing what they do, the scientists hasten E. T.’s Christ-like death. (We may add, incidentally, that Jesus happened to be the son of a working man.) We will revisit the problem of alienated work, as well as the question of how it relates to gendered spaces and bodies, in the discussion in chapter five of Pat Barker’s Union Street.

**Nature, Technology, and Communication**

To the extent that the social system depicted in E. T. seems to have fostered alienation from nature as well as alienation between men, we may also relate the film to some of the theories proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Arguing against Thomas Hobbes, and echoing Michel de Montaigne’s concept of the noble savage (Garrard 125), Rousseau can be seen as the first secular theorist of alienation. Rousseau suggested that man in the state of nature had been virtuous and innocent but had since become corrupted through the pressures of society towards conformity and dissimulation. In the preface to A Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau calls the state of nature “a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never existed, and which will probably never exist” (68), thus admitting freely that the concept may merely be a theoretical fiction that does not necessarily refer to a particular historical reality. Moreover, as Andrew Biro contends, Rousseau did not advocate a return to nature in the naive sense of abandoning society altogether; rather, Rousseau “tried to articulate solutions to the problem of alienation from nature” while at the same time conceiving of human

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39 In her novel Ceremony, Leslie Marmon Silko formulates a similar critique of the school’s role in accustoming children to a disrespect of animal life by contrasting it to Native American beliefs (incidentally also using frogs “bloated with formaldehyde” as an image to bring across the point; 194).

40 In the French original, the full sentence runs: “Car ce n’est pas une légère entreprise de démêler ce qu’il y a d’originale & d’artificiel dans la Nature actuelle de l’homme, & de bien connaître un Etat qui n’existe plus, qui n’a peut-être point existé, qui probablement n’existera jamais, & dont il est pourtant nécessaire d’avoir des Notions justes pour bien juger de notre état présent” (lvii – lviii; the spelling of the 1755 edition is retained).
beings “in a social (or postnatural) state” (Biro 60). For Rousseau, alienation is thus a historically conditioned phenomenon that can, for that very reason, be overcome (or at least mitigated) through changes to the social structure.

And indeed, E. T., too, does not dream naively of total regression to some pristine state of nature, but instead develops a critique of society’s alienation from nature precisely along Rousseauian lines. At the beginning of Spielberg’s film, we encounter E.T. and his fellow aliens in the deep night of a Californian forest, peacefully engaged in collecting samples of plants. The aliens do not simply cut off these plants, but instead remove them together with their roots as well as some soil to ensure that they can continue to thrive. Subsequently, the film’s mise-en-scène emphasizes the contrast between, on the one hand, the aliens’ quietly harmonious presence in the forest, and, on the other, the disruptive government agents, who arrive in droning cars with glaring lights and exhaust pipes spewing forth their toxic fumes. The contrast between these cars – metallic, angular contraptions – and the aliens’ soft-glowing, chubby spaceship could, indeed, scarcely be more pointed. At the same time, the scene makes clear that Spielberg’s film is not hostile to technology as such. Rather, in showing that the ecologically sensitive aliens have mastered the technology of interplanetary space travel – an achievement that has so far eluded the technocratic humans – E. T. suggests that a more respectful kind of science (i.e. one not driven exclusively by the logic of exchange-value) would in the long run be both more productive and beneficent.

The idea, however, that the alien way of life could serve as a model for a better society no longer works if the aliens in E. T. are conceived as by nature fundamentally other than humans – and according to William Alexander the construction of such an essential difference is precisely the ideological point of Spielberg’s film. We have already examined Alexander’s suggestion that E.T., as a dark-skinned alien, must be interpreted in racialist terms. However, Alexander further contends that the film E. T. attempts to naturalize racial difference, and that the scene in which Elliott saves the frogs from being anesthetized and dissected is crucial to this ideological project: “Elliott, E. T. in mind, releases his frog and urges the other pupils to release theirs, chanting ’Back to

41 After all Rousseau maintains, in The Social Contract, that society is inevitable because “there is a point in the development of mankind at which the obstacles to men’s self-preservation in the state of nature are too great to be overcome by the strength that any one individual can exert” (54; bk. 1, ch. 6). The French original runs: “Je suppose les hommes parvenus à ce point où les obstacles qui nuisent à leur conservation dans l’état de nature, l’emportent par leur résistance sur les forces que chaque individu peut employer pour se maintenir dans cet état primitif” (Contrat social 20).
the river and forest,’ a refrain the other children pick up” (31). Both E. T. and the frogs, Alexander maintains, are thus portrayed as being “out of their native habitat”; they are, the implication is, depicted as naturally unfit for life in a white, suburban environment, and must therefore “go back to where they came from” (31–33). For Alexander, that is to say, *E. T.* superficially promotes tolerance and acceptance, but is ultimately an attempt at cementing exclusion. Accordingly, as the film progresses, E. T. becomes increasingly sick, which would only seem to confirm that there is indeed something in the earthly environment to which the alien is simply unable to adapt. At any rate, if Alexander’s claim that *E. T.* naturalizes difference is correct, then this would undermine the idea that the aliens could become role models for the humans, as it hardly makes sense to emulate those who are clearly unfit to cope with the natural conditions that apply on earth.

However, Alexander’s argument in fact fails to do justice to Spielberg’s film because it does not take into account the central role of communication. Early on in the film, E. T. and Elliott are not really able to communicate with each other at all, and only gradually does the alien learn to use human language. Once he is able to make himself understood, however, E. T. is quick to point out to Elliott that he would like to re-establish contact with his fellow aliens: “E. T. phone home” (Mathison 100). Accordingly, we do not necessarily have to attribute the fact that E. T. becomes increasingly sick in the course of the film to his supposedly natural ‘unfitness.’ Instead, we may suggest that his illness is the consequence of a crushing sense of isolation: hostility from all sides in the host community, and an utter lack of communicative ties with the home community. Indeed, what supports this interpretation is the fact that E. T.’s resurrection towards the end of the film occurs at the precise moment when the other aliens, having picked up a signal of distress from a device that E. T. built especially to re-establish contact, are finally about to return to earth. E. T.’s illness thus does not serve to naturalize his absolute Otherness, but instead suggests that his suffering arises from a lack of communal support, either from aliens or from humans (with the exception of a handful of children, who are not in a position of power and on whom E.T. therefore cannot depend in the long run for protection).

Communication – or the lack of it – thus prove vital to the notion of home as it is encapsulated in *E. T.*, and several critics have likewise noted that communication in the form of language and cultural conventions is crucial to our
sense of belonging.  

For instance, in his study *Migration in World History*, Patrick Manning notes that those “who move from one community to another must learn not only a new language, but also an accompanying set of customs” (4). Likewise, Agnes Heller emphasizes the importance of cultural conventions for our sense of being at home:

A home is always a human habitat, a network of human bonds and ties, a community of kind. At home, one talks without footnotes but one can talk without footnotes on the condition that one talks to someone who understands. And if one understands the other from a few words, allusions, and gestures, a common cognitive background is already presupposed. (10)

Heller emphasizes that communication is facilitated by a “common cognitive background,” and Friedrich Nietzsche – who is otherwise notoriously skeptical about language and the value of communication (Grimm 24n26) – concedes that shared, lived experience greatly facilitates the exchange of ideas:

It is not sufficient to use the same words to understand one another: we must also employ the same words for the same kind of internal experiences, we must in the end have experiences in common. On this account the people of one nation understand one another better than those belonging to different nations, even when they use the same language; or rather, when people have lived long together under similar circumstances (of climate, soil, danger, requirement, toil) there originates therefrom an entity that ‘understands itself” – namely, a nation. (*Beyond Good and Evil* 213–214; § 268; original emphasis)

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42 See Evetts-Seeker for a Jungian interpretation of the importance of formulaic expressions in creating “a language in which the soul is at home” (138).
43 The German original runs: “Es genügt noch nicht, um sich einander zu verstehen, dass man dieselben Worte gebraucht; man muss dieselben Worte auch für dieselbe Gattung innerer Erlebnisse gebrauchen, man muss zuletzt seine Erfahrung miteinander gemein haben. Deshalb verstehen sich die Menschen Eines Volkes besser unter einander als Zugehörige verschiedner Völker, selbst wenn sie sich der gleichen Sprache bedienen; oder vielmehr, wenn Menschen lange unter ähnlichen Bedingungen (des Klima’s, des Bodens, der Gefahr, der Bedürfnisse, der Arbeit) zusammen gelebt haben, so entsteht daraus etwas, das ‘sich versteht,’ ein Volk” (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse* 253; § 268; original emphasis).
Nietzsche’s remarks point to the eminently social nature of language, which acquires its meaning in reference to shared experiences, where words can be measured against their context in an intersubjective process of negotiation.44

To say that the seemingly immaterial homes of language and communication are social phenomena necessarily implies that the ability to communicate is determined by decidedly material conditions. As Aijaz Ahmad rightly insists, the idea of ‘determination’ is not to be understood as implying an utter lack of human agency; rather, it refers “to the givenness of the circumstance within which individuals make their choices, their lives, their histories” (6; original emphasis). For example, in Spielberg’s film, E. T.’s ability to communicate with his fellow aliens is determined by the meager resources at his disposal: an electronic toy, an umbrella, and some other items he can find in Elliott’s home. If E.T. nevertheless manages to build a device that allows him to send a signal of distress to his fellow aliens, then it is reasonable to assume that he would have been able to construct a much more powerful and reliable device if he had been welcomed by his host society and given access to a wider range of resources. John Durham Peters is thus right in insisting that communication is not merely a question of semantics, but “more fundamentally a political and ethical problem” (Speaking into the Air 30).

More generally, we can say that an individual’s possibilities for ‘home-making,’ and specifically the odds for or against that individual’s ability to maintain multiple and spatially dispersed homes, change significantly depending on the social and material resources at hand. For instance, while some theorists celebrate nomadic identities as an alternative to oppressive power structures (e.g. Deleuze, Difference and Repetition 45–47; Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 60; see also Tally, Melville, Mapping and Globalization 65–67), others emphasize that “the resources for self-invention are unequally distributed,” and that accordingly the nomadic identities of a select few, though intended to subvert oppressive power structures, in fact depend on these oppressive structures (Peters, “Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora” 34). Likewise, Blunt and Dowling have pointed out that the creation and maintenance of dia-

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44 In an extended discussion, one would also have to bear in mind that not all languages have a word that is synonymous with home. Judith Flanders, for example, distinguishes between “home and house languages” (4). The home languages – English, the Germanic and Scandinavian languages, as well as the Finno-Ugric group – distinguish between the concepts of home and house (3). The Romance and Slavic languages, by contrast, “have just one word for both meanings” (4). See also Anna Wierzbicka, who in Imprisoned in English (2014) cautions against the uncritical assumption that concepts which exist in English – “the first ever global lingua franca” (64) – necessarily exist in all languages, even if they do not have a specific word for a given concept.