Introduction – Theories of Home: Alienation and Belonging in Steven Spielberg’s *E. T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*

Abandoned by his loved ones and exiled from home, E. T. is arguably the most famous illegalized alien in motion picture history. At the beginning of Steven Spielberg’s film, we see E. T. and others of his kind peacefully exploring their terrestrial surroundings – when suddenly a group of humans appears, aiming to capture the foreign ‘invaders.’ While the other aliens reach the safety of their spaceship, thus managing to elude their human pursuers, E. T. is left behind, stranded on an unfamiliar planet. In panic, E. T. runs off and hides in a field behind a suburban house, where he is later discovered by a ten-year-old boy named Elliott, whose own home was recently disrupted when the boy’s father left his mother, Mary, for a younger woman. Initially, E. T. and Elliott are afraid of each other, yet soon fear is replaced by fascination. Elliott smuggles his newfound friend to the safety of his room, where at one point the boy places his hand on a globe that stands on his desk. Looking at the alien, Elliott explains: “Earth. Home.”

In describing earth as home, Elliot’s point is evidently not that all humans feel perfectly at home in the world; the boy is not referring to profound feelings of belonging, but simply notes that earth is, for better or worse, the planet we humans inhabit, and where we must try to live our lives. And yet, it would be misleading to suggest that Elliott uses the word *home* merely as a spatial marker, for he is in fact interested in learning more about E. T.’s history. More precisely, Elliott tries to explain the meaning of the word *home* because he wants to find out what kind of being E. T. is: where he comes from, and how he got here (Kath Woodward 48). Home, in other words, also raises questions about origins and the journeys we make, and therefore has a temporal as well as a spatial dimension (Agnes Heller 7; Cecile Sandten and Kathy-Ann Tan 3). Moreover, home involves our relations with others: those with whom we share our places of

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1 I would like to thank Antoinina Bevan Zlatar and Anja Neukom-Hermann for their comments on the first draft, as well as Sarah Chevalier for her feedback on the final version of this chapter. Some of the arguments presented here are based on my essay “Resisting Governmental Illegalization: Xenophobia and Otherness in Steven Spielberg’s *E. T.: The Extra-Terrestrial.*”
shelter; those with whom we feel we belong but from whom we may at present be separated; and those with whom we are forced to struggle and engage because we simply have no other place to go (Jan Willem Duyvendak 120). Finally, even if we limit ourselves to the meaning of home as merely a kind of habitat – the place where we happen to reside – the concept’s range remains nothing short of astonishing. Home, as we try to explain it to others, can denote small-scale places of shelter – a house, for instance, or a tent – but also neighborhoods, nations, entire planets: “Earth. Home” (Figure 1).²

![Diagram of home scales](image)

**Figure 1:** The idea of home ranges across various scales (diagram adapted from Fox 19).

This conceptual range is far from a critical disadvantage. Rather, home is a powerful tool for literary and cultural analysis precisely because it is a multi-scalar and open concept that allows us effortlessly to relate our smallest and most intimate concerns to matters of truly global importance. Indeed, it is by focusing on the manifold dimensions of home – as a place of residence or shelter; as a network of given as well as of chosen relationships; as a repository

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² The diagram simplifies matters, of course. For example, it is possible to have more than one home (e.g. the apartment where one lives and the house of one’s parents, where one grew up). For some of us, the diagram would thus have to have more than one center.
of both individual and collective ideals (Alyson Blunt and Robyn Dowling 100; Fox 6); as a story of origins, waypoints, and destinations; or as a site of violence and exclusion (Rose Marangoly George 9; Sandten and Tan 8) – that we can develop critical questions, especially in situations where the term’s multiple meanings are difficult, or indeed impossible, to reconcile. As a theoretical concept, in short, home allows us to explore a dialectic movement of alienation and belonging that, in turn, is able to generate extraordinary passion, in all the senses of that word: desire and yearning; fervor, agony, and rage; but also feelings very much like love.

**Fictions of Home: Theoretical Framework**

The core theoretical assumption of this study is that fictions are home-making practices, and we will soon examine this idea more closely. It may be helpful, however, first to say a word or two about the way in which this chapter is structured, as well as to comment on the general trajectory of this study. If, for instance, this first subsection is entitled “Theoretical Framework,” then this is because the ideas developed here will not be discussed explicitly in the main chapters of this study. Instead, they constitute a way of framing the overall argument, and will accordingly be revisited in the concluding chapter. In addition, the discussion of E. T. in the remainder of this introduction is not intended to develop a comprehensive reading of Spielberg’s film. Rather, the aims of the discussion are:

(a) to introduce key ideas and concepts relating to home and belonging, as they have been proposed by various theoretical schools;
(b) to exemplify the interpretive power of these concepts by applying them to Spielberg’s film;
(c) to indicate, roughly, which of these ideas and concepts are central to which of the six main chapters of this study.

We will also examine briefly the choice of primary texts, as well as some important caveats regarding the scope of the overall argument. The introductory chapter does not, however, summarize the findings of the six main chapters; these will, instead, be presented in the conclusion.

If, in this chapter and the ones that follow, the argument will often have a meandering quality, then this is a matter of conscious choice, for in order to ‘get’ home – in the sense of understanding it – we must be willing to travel wide and far: to explore its connections to the wider world, as well as its complex internal relations. Home-making thus requires a degree of patience, and the style of the argument is to some extent meant to reflect this fact. At the same time, being
patient is not the same as tolerating aimlessness or boredom, so that a plea for
the former ought not to be misconstrued as an appeal for the latter.

The key ideas formulated in the remainder of this introductory chapter can
be summarized in the form of seven partly overlapping precepts:

1. Even in a secular analysis of home, we must bear in mind the foundational,
metaphysical dimension of questions of belonging. This means to con‐
sider, among other things, religious beliefs and motifs (such as the idea
of a transcendental home) as well as agnostic or atheist accounts of ex‐
istential angst or trauma (in the sense of a not-being-at-home in the
world).

2. References to other texts (especially canonical ones), as well as to estab‐
lished generic traditions, can be understood as home-making practices
because they add a dimension of familiarity to an unfamiliar text. How‐
ever, at the same time, we need to analyze carefully the precise way in
which these intertextual references relate (a) to the text in which they
occur, and (b) to each other, as this may alert us to important intertextual
entanglements, which in fact serve to defamiliarize and critique the tra‐
dition.

3. Familiarity, predictability, and a sense of control are essential features of
homely homes; they arise, among other things, from habitual practices
and ritual actions, and they constitute ‘energy-saving devices’ that allow
humans to focus their limited mental and physical resources on tasks of
their choice (rather than having to expend all their energy on the chal‐
lenges of everyday life). However, too much familiarity can constitute an
obstacle to understanding and (self-)knowledge, which is why alienation
effects and defamiliarizing practices are necessary tools for critical in‐
quiry (whether deployed in works of art or by critics, scholars, and other
analysts).

4. It is by no means a coincidence that the terms community and communic‐
ation are so similar to each other, as communication is central to the
establishment and maintenance of a sense of home. One factor that fa‐
cilitates successful communication is a shared cognitive background (es‐
tablished, for instance, through shared experiences), while another crucial
factor is the distribution of communicative resources. As this distribution
is unequal, some will find it easier than others to establish and maintain
a sense of home (e.g. in the case of diasporic communities).

5. Psychoanalysis provides us with powerful concepts for analyzing home –
both through Freud’s notion of the uncanny and, more generally, through
complex techniques of decoding that allow us to unearth the unconscious
forces that shape personal as well as collective identities, and which influence the very form of works of art.

6. Even the supposedly private home is a site that is permeated by relations of power, and we must always take into account the political forces that help to shape the home (as well as the individual and collective identities associated with that home). These forces include:

   (a) the marginalization of others on the basis of race or ethnicity;
   (b) cultural discourses about ideal homes – including the construction of ‘normal’ as opposed to ‘deviant’ forms of desire – and how they are diffused through various media, even in the home itself;
   (c) the gendering of domestic space and how it relates to structures of domination (e.g. patriarchy as a social system);
   (d) class relations (e.g. the production of social stratification through economic inequality, and how it appears in, and sustains or undermines, particular types of home).

7. Any critical analysis of home must focus not only on the content or ingredients of home, but also on their formal arrangement. Indeed, the core theoretical assumption of this study is formal in nature: that the concepts of fiction and home are structurally akin to each other because they involve the same form of fictionalizing negotiation between the two realms of the real and the imaginary. One implication of this assumption is that a better understanding of fiction also contributes to our understanding of home and belonging.

Evidently, each of the subsequent chapters constitutes an attempt to follow these precepts, and they may be judged accordingly.

Two caveats, however, are in order. First, the fact that this study covers only texts from between 1850 and 2000 means that all claims and findings must be treated with due caution when applied to earlier periods. Second, the six primary texts discussed in the main chapters do not constitute anything like a representative sample of fictions of home. One simple reason for this is the sheer number of texts that explicitly make home and belonging their theme. A quick search on Amazon.com, for instance, yields 16,944 titles in the category “Literature & Fiction” that feature the word *home* in their titles, and this is of course only the proverbial tip of the iceberg, as the theme of belonging can easily be central to a novel that does not announce this fact in its title.\(^3\) At the same time, the principle of selection for the primary texts used in this study is not entirely random:

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\(^3\) The search was performed on August 2, 2017.
three of the texts are English (*The Mill on the Floss*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *Union Street*), while the other three are American (*Moby-Dick*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Virgin Suicides*); three of the texts were written by men (Herman Melville, William Faulker, and Jeffrey Eugenides), while the other three were written by women (George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Pat Barker); and the texts date, roughly, to the beginning, the middle, and the end of the period covered in this study (i.e. 1851 and 1860; 1925 and 1936; 1982 and 1993). There is thus at least some socio-historical breadth to the corpus, though serious limits remain (e.g. all the English authors are women, whereas all the American authors are men; all six authors are white). At the same time, one aim of the six readings presented in the main chapters is to open up each of the primary texts to a wider range of themes, and thus hopefully to make it easier for readers from various backgrounds to discover, perhaps in unsuspected places, a little piece of that place called home.

The fact that home is such a fundamental and complex concept also means that it would be difficult to provide a comprehensive overview of the previous critical literature on the topic. Fortunately, this is also to some extent unnecessary, as Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling’s study *Home* (2006) constitutes an excellent survey of key concepts and debates (with a particular focus on the fields of geography, sociology, and anthropology, but by no means limited to them). Moreover, it is difficult to think of a more concise definition of home than the one suggested by Blunt and Dowling, who contend that home is “a *spatial imaginary*: a set of intersecting and variable ideas and feelings, which are related to context, and which construct places, extend across spaces and scales, and connect places” (2; original emphasis). Home, for Blunt and Dowling, is thus neither purely imaginary nor entirely reducible to the places and contexts that form the concept’s material basis. Crucially, the phrases “variable” and “related to context” in Blunt and Dowling’s definition also hint at the temporal dimen-

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4 Elisabeth Bronfen uses a slightly different term in the subtitle of her study *Home in Hollywood: The Imaginary Geography of Cinema* (2004), but the terminological reversal – ‘imaginary geography’ vs. ‘spatial imaginary’ – arguably signals a difference in emphasis rather than a fundamental disagreement about the components that must enter the equation.
sion of home noted earlier (highlighted as well by Sandten and Tan 3). To render this aspect more explicit, we ought perhaps to amend their formula and say that home is a spatiotemporal imaginary.

The dual quality of home as simultaneously extending into the realm of the imaginary and into spatiotemporal reality, in turn, constitutes the main reason why analyzing fiction can contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon of home as such. In The Fictive and the Imaginary (1991), Wolfgang Iser rejects the conventional binary opposition between fiction and reality, positing instead that we ought to envisage a triadic relationship between the real, the fictive, and the imaginary. According to Iser, a fictional text necessarily incorporates aspects of lived reality, but at the same time it is never reducible to this referential dimension. Instead, the act of fictionalizing also involves components and effects

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6 While it may seem tempting to replace the adjective spatiotemporal with the term chronotope – which Bakhtin defines as “time space” and which he coined to express “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in the literature” (“Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel” 84) – I refrain from doing so because the term, in Bakhtin, applies specifically to artistic representation, whereas the definition of home provided here is intended to cover non-fictional uses of the term home as well.
that do not form part of the represented reality, and which must therefore stem from some other source. Iser suggests that this other source is the imaginary, and in his view the act of fictionalizing constitutes the creative force that negotiates between the imaginary and the real. More precisely, the act of fictionalizing ‘de-realizes’ the real by relating it to the imaginary, just as it gathers or ‘concretizes’ the free-floating impulses of the imaginary into a comprehensible shape or Gestalt (The Fictive and the Imaginary 1–4). The fictive, in short, is the result of a dialectical confrontation between the real and the imaginary, and as such it is precariously poised between these different realms.

Considering that fiction’s precarious negotiation between the two poles of the real and the imaginary also applies to the concept of home, we may now propose that home is itself very similar to fiction: not in the sense of being ‘untrue’ or simply opposed to the real, but in the sense that any particular idea of home is the result of a fictionalizing act that intermingles the real with the imaginary (and vice versa). Fictions of home are therefore not merely narratives that happen to thematize the dialectic of alienation and belonging; they are also, as fictions, structurally akin to the mental processes that allow for the construction and maintenance of home in the first place. More specifically – as Franco Moretti suggests in Signs Taken for Wonders (1983) – fictional texts constitute formal compromises between the real and the imaginary, and as such they train us “without our being aware of it for an unending task of mediation and

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7 In the German original, the key passage runs: “Das Oppositionsverhältnis von Fiktion und Wirklichkeit würde die Diskussion des Fiktiven im Text um seine entscheidende Dimension verkürzen; denn offensichtlich gibt es im fiktionalen Text sehr viel Realität, die nicht nur eine solche sozialer Wirklichkeit sein muss, sondern ebenso eine der Gefühle und Empfindungen sein kann. Diese gewiss unterschiedlichen Realitäten sind ihrerseits keine Fiktionen, und sie werden auch nicht zu solchen, nur weil sie in die Darstellung fiktionaler Texte eingehen. […] Bezieht sich also der fiktionale Text auf Wirklichkeit, ohne sich in deren Bezeichnung zu erschöpfen, so ist die Wiederholung ein Akt des Fingierens, durch den Zwecke zum Vorschein kommen, die der wiederholten Wirklichkeit nicht eignen. Ist Fingieren aus der wiederholten Realität nicht ableitbar, dann bringt sich in ihm ein Imaginäres zur Geltung, das mit der im Text wiederkehrenden Realität zusammengeschlossen wird. So gewinnt der Akt des Fingierens seine Eigentümlichkeit dadurch, dass er die Wiederkehr lebensweltlicher Realität im Text bewirkt und gerade in solcher Wiederholung das Imaginäre in eine Gestalt zieht, wodurch sich die wiederkehrende Realität zum Zeichen und das Imaginäre zur Vorstelbarkeit des dadurch Bezeichneten aufheben” (Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre 20).

8 Arguing from a Jungian perspective, John Hill makes a rather similar claim about home: “As a symbol it mediates between outer reality and inner truth” (5).
Fictions themselves, that is to say, are best understood as symbolical home-making practices, in the broadly Marxist sense that they invent “imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions” (Jameson, The Political Unconscious 64). Conversely, if fictions are imaginary attempts to reach formal compromises between real-life contradictions, then this implies that one important task for literary critics is to unearth the problems that fictions attempt to solve (i.e. to ‘unpack’ the conflicting forces that led to the fictional compromise in the first place).

And yet, even though home is structurally akin to fiction, the concepts differ in two important respects, the first of which has to do with different types of truth claims. The question of truth in fiction is, of course, a thorny issue (e.g. Eagleton, The Event of Literature 106–166; Lamarque 220–254), but for our purposes it will suffice to say that fictional texts involve three basic truth claims:

(a) claims about what is true within the fictional world or with regard to the fictional text (i.e. *intra-fictional* truth claims);
(b) claims about the adequate representation of types of real-world phenomena, or kinds of real-world experiences (i.e. *generalizing* truth claims);
(c) claims about the correspondence between, on the one hand, information provided in the fiction, and, on the other, a particular state of things in the real world (i.e. truth claims of *one-to-one correspondence*).

Crucially, these three truth claims differ with regard to the grounds on which they can be contested. In the case of intra-fictional truth claims (e.g. ‘In Shake-

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9 If Elisabeth Bronfen asserts that “a knowledge of the uncanniness of existence haunts all attempts at devising protective fictions that will allow us to make sense of the contradictions and contingencies of reality,” then she is in effect expressing the same idea, albeit in a psychoanalytic rather than a Marxist idiom. After all, the phrase “un-ending task” in Moretti’s formulation signals that he, too, regards the formal compromise effected by any fictional text as inherently precarious and unstable.

10 Perhaps it is this idea of fiction as a home-making practice that Martin Heidegger has in mind when he claims, in “Poetically Man Dwells . . .” (1951), that “poetry first causes dwelling to be dwelling” (213), defining poetry as a way of “measuring” (219): “This is why poetic images are imaginings in a distinctive sense: not mere fancies and illusions but imaginings that are visible inclusions of the alien in the sight of the familiar” (223). The German original runs: “Darum sind die dichterischen Bilder Ein-Bildungen in einem ausgezeichneten Sinne: nicht bloße Phantasien und Illusionen, sondern Ein-Bildungen als erblickbare Einschlüsse des Fremden in den Anblick des Vertrauten” (“... dichterisch wohnet der Mensch ...” 195). Robert Mugerauer succinctly sums up Heidegger’s view: “The poet attempts to find a true home by wandering out into the foreign” (119).

11 For a brief account of the intellectual lineage that defines fiction as an imaginary solution of real-life contradictions see Haslett (67).
As Lamarque rightly notes, literary truth “is not always to be found spelt out explicitly in literary works,” which means that readers are often “called upon to construct their own generalizations” (236). In the case of generalizing truth claims, by contrast (e.g. ‘Jane Austen is right when she writes: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife”’; *Pride and Prejudice* 5), we must refer to evidence pertaining to the real world when formulating a counter-argument (“What about men who are attracted to other men?”). In the case of fictional truth claims of one-to-one correspondence, finally (e.g. ‘In 1991, Zurich was the capital of Switzerland’), readers are free to take note of divergences between the fictional world and real life (“In fact it was Berne”), but as it is essential to the game of fiction that constraints on truth claims of one-to-one correspondence be playfully suspended, such divergences do not constitute lies, or even inaccuracies. Instead, counterfactuals in fiction prompt a series of interpretive questions: What is the function of these divergences within the fictional text? Do they contribute to or detract from the text’s aesthetic and rhetorical effectiveness? And is it morally justifiably to ‘play around’ with the particular facts in question? Even in the case of fiction, in short, truth claims of one-to-one correspondence remain open to critical debate, but they cannot be challenged directly on the basis of their divergence from fact – and this is what distinguishes the fictional compromise between the real and the imaginary from the structurally analogous compromise of home as a spatiotemporal imaginary. In the case of truth claims about home, constraints on one-to-one correspondence remain in full force, and it is therefore legitimate to challenge any divergences of this kind directly (“No, Dietikon is *not* your home because you have no relation to that place and in fact don’t even know where it is”).

If these different rules for how to challenge truth claims provide us with one criterion theoretically to distinguish the concept of home from that of fiction, then the second criterion pertains to these concepts’ respective degrees of closure. In the case of fiction, the compromise between the real and the imaginary is necessarily expressed in a definite shape (i.e. a finished product, such as a written text or a film). By contrast, home as a spatiotemporal imaginary remains, for the most part, implicit, or is expressed piecemeal, either by individuals or by

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12 As Lamarque rightly notes, literary truth “is not always to be found spelt out explicitly in literary works,” which means that readers are often “called upon to construct their own generalizations” (236). Accordingly, the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice* is used here as a simplified example, for the sake of the argument. In the context of Jane Austen’s novel, it should, of course, not necessarily be taken at face value.
collectives, in evolving communicative situations. Home as a mental structure is thus generally fuzzier, and likely to be less internally consistent, than fiction – which means, conversely, that the pressure to find satisfactory compromises is much higher in the case of fiction, as fiction must give a much more clear-cut form to the compromise between the real and the imaginary than is the case for constructions of home. This, in turn, allows us to speculate that the need for fictions becomes particularly acute precisely in those moments when socio-historical pressures bring to the fore certain contradictions in the (usually implicit) spatiotemporal imaginary of home. Fiction’s formal compromise, though perhaps unable truly to resolve such crises, at least serves temporarily to dilute and reduce the contradictory stresses that threaten our sense of home and belonging – which is merely to reiterate, in slightly different form, that fiction itself is a home-making practice.

The Metaphysics of Home: Religion, the Canon, and Existential Trauma

As we have seen, home is a spatiotemporal imaginary, and as such it is concerned with our place in the world, both in the sense of our geographical location and of our position within the larger scheme of things. Accordingly, an inquiry into the nature of belonging may quickly lead us beyond questions of daily existence, toward the realm of metaphysical speculation. More specifically, inquiries into the nature of home are likely to spark questions of a religious nature because religions tend to hold forth the promise of a final, transcendental home. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, for instance, humanity appears as tragically fallen: expelled from Eden, and exiled in the desert of earthly existence (an idea powerfully expressed, for instance, in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*). As John Durham Peters observes, there is thus at least one similarity between Judeo-Christian and poststructuralist thought, for in both these traditions human identity is seen as inherently incomplete and discontinuous with itself (“Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora” 22). According to Peters, Christian discourse in particular has come to be suffused with nomadic imagery, with St. Paul’s ideas being particularly influential: “The human body for him is a temporary, mobile dwelling in which mortals sojourn on earth” (27–28). In this view, humans are wanderers on the face of the earth, and only in death, when we have finally left our nomadic bodies behind, is it possible for us to recover our transcendental home in God, with whom we will forever rest in peace.

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13 Note, however, Thomas Barrie’s important caveat that “estrangement from the world is found pan-culturally and trans-historically,” albeit with different inflections and evaluations (4). For Barrie, one of the functions of architecture may be precisely “to ameliorate humanity’s homeless condition” (6).
Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.* explicitly draws on this religious narrative of alienation and belonging in order to enhance the significance of little Elliott’s quest. As already noted briefly, Elliott’s own father is absent from the home; he has left the mother and moved to Mexico with his new partner. Elliott longs for the absent father, and E. T. assumes the role of a Messiah who will guide the boy towards a new sense of belonging. Indeed, as Thomas Sebeok has noted, *E.T.*’s emotional power depends to a large extent on its “subliminal religious infrastructure” (662). Spielberg’s film tells the story of an otherworldly being who, we will find, has the power to heal little Elliott’s wound when the boy cuts himself on a sawblade; a being who dies, is resurrected, and who, in the final scene, ascends once again to his heavenly home (Alexander 25; Tomasulo 275). The film’s religious subtext is also apparent visually, as when E. T.’s glowing heart alludes to the iconographic tradition of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Figure 2). In fact, even the film’s advertising campaign has incorporated this religious dimension, with official posters pointing to Michelangelo’s depiction of the creation of man in the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel (Figure 3). In *E.T.* – as in many texts about home – a protagonist’s attempt to find a place in the world thus assumes a profoundly metaphysical dimension, and it is arguably for this very reason that the eponymous heroine of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) includes *home* in her list of the “great words” (the others being *love*, *joy*, *happiness*, *mother*, *father*, and *husband*; 62; ch. 6). At the same time, to say that Elliott’s quest gains in metaphysical depth, as well as emotional resonance, through the film’s use of religious imagery is not to argue that *E. T.* is in fact a religious film; the point is, rather, that intertextual references affect our reactions to the film. More generally, references to religious and other texts that are widely familiar can enhance the spectator’s sense of belonging, as they place the individual work of art within a larger system of meaning.

Historically, it was the literary canon – or in Matthew Arnold’s famous phrase, “the best that has been said and thought in the world” (*Culture and Anarchy* 5) – that was to provide men and women with a sense of belonging to a higher order that was not, strictly speaking, transcendental, but that at least
transcended the spatiotemporal limits of these individuals. Indeed, the term *canon* – which originally referred to the list of biblical books “accepted by the Christian Church as genuine and inspired” (OED) – itself bears witness to the quasi-religious function envisioned by Arnold for the monuments of high culture. In fact, Arnold and other Victorian thinkers (e.g. Thomas Carlyle) had quite explicitly conceived of ‘high culture’ as a means both to cultivate the soul and to ensure social cohesion in the absence of religious certainties (Philip Davis 133–134; Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 21). Agnes Heller has captured well the utopian hope embodied in this high-cultural home that, ideally, would form the basis for universal belonging:

This home is not private, everyone can join it, and in this sense, it is also cosmopolitan. The assurance that everyone can join, refers both to the works that this home entails and to the visitors who enter with nostalgia and a quest for meaning. [...] At the outset few works were admitted, now almost everything is. At the beginning there were also few visitors but later their number began to grow. Now, this, originally European [...] home is visited by millions with all possible cultural backgrounds. (9)
Figure 2: The iconography of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is reflected in E. T.’s glowing heart. (Screenshot from E. T.; © by Amblin/Universal Studios, used by permission)
Figure 3: Michelangelo’s depiction of the creation is echoed in official ads for *E. T.*
Heller herself notes, however, that the canon, as envisioned by Arnold and others, can only fulfill this function of creating a sense of universal belonging if it remains limited and exclusive; as soon as too many works are included, the canon’s ability to serve as a discursive home begins to crack and, ultimately, collapses (10). The Arnoldian ideal of the canon as home is thus in one sense inherently contradictory, for it can only serve as a discursive medium of universal inclusion if it simultaneously remains thoroughly exclusive in terms of the works it incorporates. Many will, in other words, not be directly represented in this assembly of high culture, and will therefore simply have to trust that those who are included will speak on their behalf. The logic of canonization thus resembles closely Victorian arguments for a limited franchise – a parallel that is arguably not accidental.

At any rate, those who happen to be unfamiliar with the canonical texts that, supposedly, form part of “a common cognitive background” (Heller 10) may find that intertextual references can also have a profoundly alienating effect. Comedies, for instance, are a highly allusive type of genre – and therefore they travel rather less well across cultural borders than other types of texts, for as Franco Moretti has observed, “laughter arises out of the unspoken assumptions that are buried very deep in a culture’s history: and if these are not your assumptions, the automatic component so essential to laughter disappears” (“Planet Hollywood” 99). When exposed to a comedy from a very distant time or place, we may thus not experience the relief of shared laughter, but instead find ourselves puzzled and disoriented. More generally, allusions to unknown texts may confuse rather than reassure, provided the allusion is nevertheless recognized as such. In E. T., for instance, the film’s religious infrastructure arguably does not feel particularly alienating for anyone because it remains largely subliminal; it is perfectly possible to watch the film without ever realizing that it draws on biblical imagery, so that even those who are unfamiliar with the story of Jesus are unlikely to feel excluded from the film’s intended audience. However, E. T. also contains a reference to Peter Pan (to which we will return later), and because this reference is more explicit, it is possible that those who have never heard of this text will, at least momentarily, feel alienated by its intertextual inclusion.

Let us briefly recapitulate the relation between religious transcendence and the literary canon as a secular attempt to replace a lost metaphysical home. Victorian intellectuals not only worried about statistics that indicated a sharp decline in religious observance, but also themselves suffered from a sense of metaphysical ‘unbelonging’ prompted, among other things, by Darwin’s theory of evolution; at the same time, they hoped that the secular religion of high culture, as encapsulated in the canon, might serve to alleviate the socially disruptive
Indeed, C. A. Bayly argues that, from a global perspective, the nineteenth century in fact witnessed an expansion of the major world religions (7), and while secularization certainly gained ground in twentieth-century Britain (e.g. Turner 49), religion remains central in many other countries – very much including the United States (which, incidentally, would make it possible to read E. T.’s messianic subtext as simply a cynical attempt by Hollywood producers to convert Americans’ faith in religion into the more tangible stuff of box-office gold).

Rather, the point is to emphasize that those who have no faith in a transcendental home also lack that sense of metaphysical belonging that religion has, for many, been able to provide. Bereft of a metaphysical home, these unbelievers may therefore seek other, more secular types of spiritual shelter.

Following Georg Lukács, we may describe the condition that results from a loss of faith as “transcendental homelessness” (40–41): a sense that human existence is purely contingent, and that humankind is adrift in a universe that is indifferent to human happiness or suffering. Secular individuals can, in other words, no longer find comfort in the idea that life is securely anchored in transcendental meaning, but instead experience the Heideggerian anxiety of finding themselves thrown into being or Dasein (Being and Time 131): an existential angst that Heidegger explicitly describes as a sense of “not-being-at-home” (182; see Agnes Heller 4; Mugeruaer 43; O’Donoghue 139). Dominick LaCapra has suggested the term structural or existential trauma to express the disturbing nature of this experience, though at the same time LaCapra is careful to distinguish this phenomenon from what he dubs historical trauma, which by contrast “is related to specific events, such as the Shoah or the dropping of the atom bomb on Japanese cities” (History and Memory after Auschwitz 47). In the case of E. T., we might therefore say that the film threatens to elide the distinction between the existential threat of transcendental homelessness, and Elliott’s more limited, historical trauma of losing the comforting presence of his father. More generally, moreover, we may regard trauma as one of the most dramatic symptoms of not-being-at-home in the world, and the discussion of Herman Melville’s
Moby-Dick in chapter one will revolve precisely around such questions as transcendental homelessness and how it relates to existential and historical forms of trauma.

Growing Up: Redefining the Meaning of Home
Returning to the discussion of Spielberg’s E. T. and its second important intertext, Peter Pan, we must first note that, in J. M. Barrie’s story, the process of growing up is conceived as a dialectic of exile and homecoming. 18 Early on in the story, Peter Pan – “the boy who wouldn’t grow up,” according to the subtitle of the original stage version (179) – leads Wendy and her two little brothers away from the family home, taking them with him to Neverland. There, Wendy and her brothers have all kinds of dangerous adventures, but ultimately they return to the family home where, in time, they grow up and become adults. Years later, when Wendy tells her daughter Jenny about her adventures in Neverland, the girl wonders why Wendy is no longer able to fly, which apparently she had been capable of as a child. Wendy, however, knows exactly why adults, unlike children, remain earthbound: “they are no longer gay and innocent and heartless” (174; ch. 17). And it is true that Peter appears heartless throughout Barrie’s story; we learn, for instance, that with regard to heroic deeds, “it was his cleverness that interested him and not the saving of human life” (82; ch. 4). Indeed, as Annie Hiebert Alton rightly notes, Peter’s heartlessness is that of a very small child who “seems unaware of the feelings of others” (174n1). Accordingly, as an eternal child Peter is free from the ties that bind one to others, and can simply do whatever he pleases. 19 This freedom, however, comes at the cost of familial belonging, for as we learn at the end of a chapter entitled “The Return Home” – in which Wendy and her brothers are reunited with their parents – Peter “had ecstasies innumerable that other children can never know, but he was looking through the window at the one joy from which he must be for ever barred” (169; ch. 16). In Peter Pan, in short, there is an irreconcilable conflict between, on the one hand, freedom from interference with one’s desires, and, on the other, the freedom to belong and be part of a family home – with everyone except Peter eventually opting for the latter. 20

18 For a recent, book-length study of Barrie’s story (including adaptations and sequels) see Kirsten Stirling, Peter Pan’s Shadows in the Literary Imagination (2012).
19 See Ann Yeoman, Now or Neverland (1998) for an extended Jungian reading of Peter Pan as a puer aeternus.
20 This may, of course, be a misleading dichotomy – but the point is that the text establishes it as such.
The idea that as children we enjoy a greater degree of freedom than is the case later in life may, of course, be merely an instance of nostalgic idealization – and nostalgia is in fact a crucial concept in any discussion of home because it can be understood, like trauma, as one particular symptom of alienation and unbelonging. According to Kimberley K. Smith, the term *nostalgia* was coined in 1688 by the physician Johann Hofer, who used it to describe a severe, even potentially fatal illness diagnosed among Swiss mercenaries, and in Hofer’s view caused by the mercenaries’ physical absence from home (509). In the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Smith continues, the concept’s meaning broadened and complicated: “Once defined simply as a desire to return home, to a specific *place*, nostalgia was gradually being conceptualized as a longing to return to a former *time* – and usually a time the patient only *imagined* to be better” (512; original emphasis). Smith’s main point, however, is that we should not simply dismiss the longing for the past as “mere nostalgia,” but instead regard nostalgic desires “as a valuable basis for social critique” (523). While we may all agree that it is impossible to simply return to a past state, nostalgic subjects may nevertheless have perfectly valid reasons for rejecting the current state of affairs. More generally, nostalgia is an expression of individual or collective values and desires that, as such, may very well be legitimate. If Elliott, for instance, longs for the time before his father left the family home, then a certain degree of nostalgic idealization may well be involved, but this does not invalidate the boy’s desire to be reunited with a person he loves. At the same time, Roberta Rubenstein suggests that “nostalgia, or homesickness […] is the existential condition of adulthood” because the process of growing up turns all into “exiles from childhood” (4–5) – an idea symbolized in *Peter Pan* through adults’ exile from Neverland.

At any rate, the implications of growing up as depicted in *Peter Pan* match precisely some key concerns of *E. T.*, as the latter, too, tells the story of a child who must learn to respect the feelings of others as part of the process of coming of age. The importance of a respect for the feelings of others is made clear early on in Spielberg’s film when Elliott, after his first brief encounter with E. T., fails to convince his mother (as well as his brother and sister) that he has really stumbled upon something unusual in the field behind the family’s suburban home:

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21 See Jan Willem Duyvendak: “Nostalgia is not necessarily problematic, so long as we understand that nostalgia says more about contemporary society than it does about the past” (107; see also Kirk 606; Peters, “Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora” 30).
MARY
[M]aybe you just probably imagined that it happened.

ELLIOTT
I couldn’t have imagined it! […] Dad would believe me.

MARY
Maybe you ought to call your father and tell him about it.

ELLIOTT
I can’t. He’s in Mexico with Sally. (Mathison 63)

Elliott’s mother is evidently shaken by her son’s heartless reference to the father’s new lover, and eventually leaves the kitchen in tears. Michael, Elliott’s older brother, is furious: “Damn it! Why don’t you… grow up? Think of how other people feel for a change!” (Mathison 64). Michael thus explicitly defines Elliott’s task as the need to be more empathetic, and it is thus significant that Mary will later read the story of Peter Pan not to him, but to his little sister, Gertie, who is still young enough to be “gay and innocent and heartless,” whereas Elliott has already left behind the stage of infantile narcissism and begun his journey toward adulthood. Indeed, the film’s mise-en-scène during the sequence discussed above emphasizes Elliott’s transitional state, as Elliott is shown sitting on one side of a rather oddly-shaped, triangular kitchen table, with Gertie placed on her own on another, and both Mary and Michael positioned at the third (Figure 4). Elliott is thus situated symbolically between a very small child and two more adult figures, while at the same time the framing of the shot makes him appear as still closer to his younger sister. The remainder of Spielberg’s film then tells the story of how Elliott is saved from the error of his former, childish ways by his encounter with E. T. the Messiah. Accordingly, when at the end of the film E. T. is ready to go back home, it is no longer Elliott, but Gertie who is in need of spiritual guidance from the alien, whose message to her is as simple as it is clear: “Be good” (Mathison 146).
And yet, above and beyond these rather homely pieties, the film’s juxtaposition of *Peter Pan* with elements from the story of Jesus Christ also has some rather more unsettling effects, which becomes apparent if we examine closely the scene in *E.T.* in which the two intertextual references are most explicitly intertwined. The scene in question occurs roughly in the middle of the film and shows Elliott and E. T. hiding in the closet of Gertie’s bedroom while Mary is reading to Gertie from *Peter Pan*. The passage Mary reads to Gertie tells the story of how Peter tries to save the fairy Tinker Bell by breaking the frame of the fictional world and appealing to the children in the audience:

**MARY**

“Her voice is so low I can scarcely tell what she is saying. She says, she says she thinks she could get well again if children believed in fairies. Do you believe in fairies? Say quick that you believe!” [...]  

**GERTIE**  

It is precisely during this scene about children’s belief in fairies that Elliott, hidden in the closet, cuts himself on a sawblade and starts to bleed, which prompts E. T. to heal the boy’s wound with the gentle touch of a finger (Mathison 103–104). This surprising juxtaposition suggests a parallel between, on the one hand, a belief in the healing powers of a Messiah, and, on the other, a belief in fairies – as if the two were one and the same.\(^{22}\) This, in turn, illustrates the extent to which intertextual play can develop a dynamic of its own, with various

\[^{22}\] For a different (and more detailed) reading of the parallels between *E. T.* and *Peter Pan* see Patricia Read Russel’s essay “Parallel Romantic Fantasies.”
strands of references becoming entangled and sometimes tied up in complicated knots. Put differently, the interplay between E. T.’s combined references to Peter Pan and to the story of Jesus Christ shows that the use of canonical intertexts may – intentionally or not – lead to moments of friction that end up defamiliarizing the well-known originals. In this way, literary traditions are opened up to critique – as is the case in George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss, which we will examine in chapter two, and which, like E. T. and Peter Pan, revolves around the problem of growing up, the protagonists’ occasionally nostalgic relation to home and belonging, and the critical use and reexamination of established discursive traditions (including genres such as the Bildungsroman and tragedy).

The Question of Racism and the Politics of Home

In the case of E. T., we can widen the political scope of intertextual critique if we focus on a third set of references that relates, on the one hand, to other films featuring aliens, and, on the other, to one of the most canonical of English novels: Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. Admittedly, Robinson Crusoe is far less prominent a presence in the film than is Peter Pan or the story of Jesus. Nevertheless, relating E. T. to Defoe’s novel helps us capture more precisely some of the film’s political import. The most famous section of Defoe’s novel tells the story of how Crusoe ends up stranded on an island that he soon regards as his “little kingdom” (109). Accordingly, many critics have insisted that the novel’s ideology is deeply colonialist; after all, it depicts a white man appropriating new territory that he subsequently defends against native ‘intruders’ – with the exception of one, whom he turns into his personal slave, imposing on him a new name, a new language, and a new religion (e.g. Carter and McRae 154–155; Stam 71–74). Given this colonialist ideology, one may begin to wonder for whom, precisely, the canon comprises “the best that has been said and thought in the world” – and critiques of this kind have of course long been central to the larger project of postcolonial studies. In the context of our discussion, however, it is sufficient to note that the story of Robinson Crusoe contrasts markedly with Spielberg’s

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23 A more detailed account of the idea that intertextual frames create various kinds of friction can be found in Simone Heller-Andrist’s monograph The Friction of the Frame (172–244).

24 One classic example of such a critique is Chinua Achebe’s attack on Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, a text that Achebe regards as profoundly racist because it portrays Africa as “a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (783). Note that J. Hillis Miller has formulated a nuanced reassessment of Achebe’s argument in an essay entitled “Joseph Conrad: Should We Read Heart of Darkness?” (Others 104–136).
E. T., whose title character, like Crusoe, is stranded alone on alien shores, but who, unlike Crusoe, harbors no aspirations to dominate the natives.

The contrast between E. T. and Robinson Crusoe is all the more remarkable if we bear in mind that, in the decades following the 1950s, a large number of American films featuring aliens had revolved precisely around the threat of invasion (e.g. Booker, *Alternate Americas* 5). This is not, of course, to claim that there had never before been films in which aliens were portrayed as benevolent creatures. For instance, in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), the alien Klaatu is on a mission to save rather than destroy the human race by forcing it to abandon its self-destructive ways. Moreover, Spielberg himself had previously scored a huge box-office hit with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), which also features benevolent aliens. The point, however, is that, in E. T., the agents of the government behave as if the aliens were aggressors (as many other fictional aliens – including Crusoe – in fact had been). Home is, in short, not a pre-political space, but a conflictual terrain that usually involves the systematic exclusion of those perceived as alien (Rosemary Marangoly George 9).

One way to account for the irrational fear exhibited by the government agents in E. T. is to use Stephen D. Arata’s diagnosis that imperial centers may at times suffer from an “anxiety of reverse colonization.” In a reading of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Arata argues that the Transylvanian Count serves as a mirror-image of Western colonizers: an alien from the East who has spent much time and effort to acquire useful knowledge about the Occident, and who plans to use this knowledge “to invade and exploit Britain and her people” (638). According to Arata, Stoker’s novel must be read against the backdrop of a *fin-de-siècle* perception of decline of Britain as an imperial power (622). This narrative of imperial decline, in turn, explains a widespread anxiety of reverse colonization, which Arata defines as the impression that “what has been represented as the ‘civilized’ world is on the point of being colonized by ‘primitive’ forces” (623). Arata insists, however, that geopolitical fears are only half the story, with metropolitan guilt constituting a second key ingredient:

In the marauding, invasive Other, British culture sees its own imperial practices mirrored back in monstrous form. [...] Reverse colonization narratives thus contain the potential for powerful critiques of imperialist ideologies, even if that potential usually remains unrealized. (623)

In Arata’s view, then, anxieties of reverse colonization project the colonizing practices of the metropolis back onto the screen of an alien Other, who may then serve as a fantasied scapegoat figure.
If it is true that Dracula constituted a projection of late Victorian British guilt, then E. T. – that dark-skinned alien who secretly enters a white suburban home – perhaps fulfills a similar scapegoat function for a guilt-ridden United States Empire. William Alexander, for instance, argues that E.T. is suffused with markedly racist sentiments. In the film, Alexander contends, E.T. is subliminally associated not only with monkeys (by being shown next to a monkey doll; Figure 5), but also with primitivism (he comes from the woods and possesses magic powers) and with the ‘non-white’ places of the earth (at one point E.T. is shown standing in front of a globe on which the audience can see Asia and Africa; Figure 6). For Alexander, the verdict is therefore clear:

[Spielberg’s film] brings the threatening, righteously angry figure – the unemployed black youth, the guerrilla fighter of Central America who has said ‘enough’ to the centuries of hunger, the starving Latin American child, the napalmed Vietnamese peasant we are trying to forget, the minimum wage worker, the potential disrupter of suburban comfort and economic status – into the suburb. (33)

E.T., the illegalized, dark-skinned alien, violates the boundaries of white suburbia, and the government acts quickly to try and re-establish control over the imperial nation’s privileged social space. Moreover, on the larger scale of the national home, the U.S. government’s determination to capture any illegal alien also involves an act of force against its own citizens, whose suburban home is invaded in E. T. by state officials (Figure 7). As the internment of Japanese...
Likewise, when placed in the context of South African history, the term ‘homeland’ is itself decidedly unhomely, as it was used by the Apartheid regime to designate ten preponderantly rural areas assigned as mandatory places of residence to the country’s black population (Butler, Rotberg and Adams 1).

Both these historical examples highlight the crucial analytical importance of relating particular, small-scale homes to their broader social, cultural, and historical contexts – and it is precisely the politics and ethics of homes situated in a metropolitan center that will constitute a key theme in the discussion in chapter three of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Figure 5: E. T. happens to hide right next to a monkey doll. (Screenshot from *E. T.*; © by Amblin/ Universal Studios, used by permission.)
The Return of the Repressed: History, the Family, and the Freudian Uncanny

While homes in general are shaped by larger power structures, the particular agents of domination often reside in the home itself, with some inhabitants exerting a truly tyrannous control over the minds and bodies of others (Douglas, “The Idea of Home” 277). Children, for instance, are often seen as key inhabitants of truly homely homes, but many parents do not grant them much “agency in the running or representation of these homes” (Blunt and Dowling 115). Such familial domination in fact plays an important part in E.T., for it is because Elliott’s mother would surely not allow E.T. to stay that the boy hides him from her. Indeed, given that Elliott at one point literally keeps E.T. in the closet, his fear of parental sanction may productively be read from a queer perspective: the alien, it seems, must not come out. More generally speaking,
what counts as a ‘proper’ or ‘homely’ home very often depends on individuals’ physical and moral conformity to cultural ideals and prejudices, and the supposedly private family home often serves as one key site where these values are passed on to future generations.

To some extent the formative influence of childhood homes explains the widespread assumption that learning more about someone’s home tells us something about the kind of person they are. As we have already seen, it is precisely this assumption that motivates Elliott to convey the meaning of “home” to E.T.: the boy wants to find out where the alien comes from in order to understand what kind of being he is. Such a “conflation of home and self” is, as Rosemary Marangoly George points out, a central trope in various disciplines: “literary theory, architecture, sociology, political science, geography, philosophy and psychology” (19). At the same time, Marangoly George highlights the danger inherent in conflating home and self, as those who are homeless, or who happen to live in ‘deviant’ homes, may easily come to be judged as faulty selves (24). This is all the more so because, as Blunt and Dowling observe, in any given society or culture “a central feature of imaginaries of home is their idealization: certain dwelling structures and social relations are imagined to be ‘better’” (100). Historically specific ideals of a ‘stable home’ help explain, for instance, why ‘unsettled’ nomads have repeatedly been regarded as a threat to societal order, with the nineteenth century in particular witnessing a worldwide onslaught on nomadic ways of life (Bayly 434; Osterhammel 173).

In addition, the formative influence of childhood homes is one reason why the family is of such crucial importance to the discourse of psychoanalysis. In her study *Figurations of Exile*, Barbara Straumann even suggests that psychoanalysis is “the most paradigmatic critical discourse of twentieth-century culture to address questions of identity and belonging as well as the fundamental dislocation subtending all subjectivity” (13). Freud, for instance, famously used a bourgeois domestic metaphor when he argued that the ego “is not master in his own house” (*Introductory Lectures* 285), and such concepts as the family romance and the Oedipal triangle between mother, father, and child, are of course central to psychoanalytic endeavors. In addition, in later texts – such as *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) or *Civilization and Its Dis-

The German original runs: “[Das] Unheimlich ist wirklich nichts Neues oder Fremdes, sondern etwas dem Seelenleben von alters her Vertrautes, das ihm nur durch den Prozess der Verdrängung entfremdet worden ist” (“Das Unheimliche” 264).

30 The double or *Doppelgänger* is, for Freud, one particularly frequent motif associated with the uncanny (141), and E.T. in fact functions as the uncanny double for Elliott. As Julia Kristeva notes, initially one’s encounter with the double “is a shock” (*Strangers to Ourselves* 188) – and in Spielberg’s film, shock is Elliott’s first reaction at seeing E.T. when the boy stumbles upon him in the field behind his suburban home. Crucially, E.T.’s reaction mirrors Elliott’s precisely, and they flee from each other in panic. In time, however, Elliott overcomes his initial reaction of shock and coaxes E.T. to the safety of his room. There, E.T. soon becomes sleepy, and Elliott, too, drifts off to sleep, as if to emphasize the extent to which they mirror each other. In a later sequence, in the course of which Elliott explains the contents of his room to E.T., the alien tries to eat Elliott’s toy car, prompting the boy to exclaim: “Hey, wait a second!


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31 Jung’s concept of the shadow is in fact very similar to Freud’s notion of the double. This becomes apparent, for instance, in Jung’s essay “Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious”: “[T]he meeting with ourselves belongs to the more unpleasant things that can be avoided so long as we can project everything negative into the environment. But if we are able to see our own shadow and can bear knowing about it, then a small part of the problem has already been solved” (20; § 44). The German original runs: “[D]ie Begegnung mit sich selbst gehört zu den unangenehmeren Dingen, denen man entgeht, solange man alles Negative auf die Umwelt projizieren kann. Ist man imstande, den eigenen Schatten zu sehen und das Wissen um ihn zu ertragen, so ist ein erster kleiner Teil der Aufgabe gelöst” (“Über die Archetypen des kollektiven Unbewussten” 23). For a good summary of Jung’s concept of the shadow see Murray Stein, *Jung’s Map of the Soul* (105–124).
No! You don’t eat ’em. Are you hungry? I’m hungry” (Mathison 69). The emotional parallel between them thus continues, and while Elliott goes to the kitchen to grab some food, E. T. explores the boy’s room and finds an umbrella. Suddenly, the umbrella opens and startles, not only E. T., but also Elliott, who is still downstairs in the kitchen. This moment makes it clear to the audience that there is a mysterious telepathic link between the two – and Freud explicitly mentions telepathy as yet another motif typically associated with the uncanny (141).

Given E. T.’s function as Elliott’s (initially) uncanny double, there is a good case to be made that the alien in fact represents Elliott’s unconscious. Thomas Sebeok, for instance, has pointed out that E. T. and Elliott are not merely friends, but in a profound sense “identical, as the boy’s very name, Elliot T, insinuates” (661). From ‘Elliott’ to ‘E. T.’ by means of condensation and displacement: we are faced with two of the crucial mechanisms of the Freudian unconscious.32 Moreover, in one scene in Spielberg’s film E. T. makes a notably appreciative noise when seeing Elliott’s mother, Mary, in a tight-fitting Halloween costume, as if Elliott’s Oedipal desire for Mary had been displaced onto his alien friend. In fact, a scene was cut from the final version of the film that would have rendered this Oedipal dimension much more explicit, with E. T. going into Mary’s room and leaving some candy on her pillow to imply “that E. T. had a crush on Mary” (Mathison 104). One may therefore speculate that the filmmaker’s decision to cut the scene constituted an act of censorship in the precise psychoanalytic sense of an attempt to repress inadmissible desires.

Another sequence, at the end of which Elliott kisses a girl in school, not only strengthens the idea that E. T. embodies Elliott’s unconscious, but also suggests that even desire itself – that seemingly innermost part of our nature – is in fact shaped at least in part by public forces. In this complex sequence, the film intercuts two different scenes: on the one hand, we see E. T. exploring the family home while everyone is away at school or work, and on the other hand we follow Elliott’s adventures in the classroom. Throughout the sequence, the telepathic link between E. T. and Elliott is emphasized, as when E. T. drinks some beer that he discovers in the fridge, which leaves not only him, but also Elliott notably inebriated (with E. T. bumping into the kitchen cabinet, and Elliott winking at a pretty girl and then slowly sliding off his chair, onto the classroom floor). Both the alien and the boy eventually recover their wits, and we see E. T. watching TV while Elliott is now in biology class, where he and his classmates are expected to anesthetize frogs and then to dissect them. Elliott, however, when looking at

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32 For a brief summary of these mechanisms see Freud, The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious (20–21).
the helpless, lonely frog on his desk, is suddenly reminded of E.T.; muttering “Save him” to himself, the boy first frees his own frog and then proceeds to liberate the others (Mathison 88) – which, unsurprisingly, leads to chaos in the classroom. The film now cuts back to E.T. watching TV, and we find him watching a “soppy love scene” from the movie *The Quiet Man* (Mathison 90). E.T. watches engrossed as the male protagonist grabs the arm of his female counterpart, pulling her close in a dramatic sweep and kissing her as passionately as any movie heroes can. Next, we return to the classroom, where Elliott will soon re-enact this heterosexual fantasy scenario with the pretty girl he had winked at earlier on. The scene thus bears out Slavoj Žižek’s claim that cinema “doesn’t give you what you desire; it tells you how to desire” (*The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*) – which in turn implies that our desires are to some extent alien to ourselves, shaped and mediated in crucial ways by the public media discourses to which we are exposed even in the privacy of our homes.33

It is at this point that we must note that E.T.’s role as a representation of Elliott’s unconscious shifts from being at first associated with the Id (e.g. Oedipal desire) to becoming an embodiment of the super-ego. If E.T., in the beginning, provides Elliott merely with a mirror image of his own psychic drives, then after his death and resurrection the alien becomes an awe-inspiring, messianic figure who urges Gertie to “[b]e good,” and who thus voices – very much in the Name of the Lacanian Father – the moral imperative commonly associated with the super-ego (Homer 57–58; Thurschwell 48). In passing, we may observe that E.T. tells only the female child to be good, and that this is perhaps due to the misogynist bias that Phyllis Deutsch detects in Spielberg’s film (12–13). More importantly, for the time being, we must note that E.T.’s death is the moment when the telepathic link between the alien and Elliott is finally broken, as if to emphasize that the boy has now moved beyond his earlier, narcissistic identification with the double or mirror-image, and instead accepted the symbolic call of a newfound father figure.34 It is precisely such intimate notions as desire and the uncanny, as well as the question of how the father’s material and symbolic position within the familial home relates to wider socio-historical contexts, which

33 For a more general account of this Lacanian claim that Žižek makes in *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (dir. Sophie Fiennes) see Žižek’s *Looking Awry* (6). For two similar accounts of the self as inseparable from otherness see Julie Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988), and Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (1990).

34 Note that Terry Eagleton describes the symbolic order as a structure in which we are “never entirely at home,” in part because the imaginary always remains with us as a kind of excess (*Trouble with Strangers* 84).
will be explored in detail in the discussion of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* in chapter four.

**Alienation and Oppression at Home: Feminist and Marxist Critiques**

Some of the most powerful critiques of the father’s position within the family home have arguably come from feminist thinkers. The institution of marriage, for instance, has historically been deeply problematic for women – an insight that is memorably expressed by Bathsheba Everdene in Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), when she explains to Liddy, her maid and confidante, why simply to run away from an unhappy marital union does not constitute a viable solution for her:

> A runaway wife is an encumbrance to everybody, a burden to herself, and a byword – all of which make up a heap of misery greater than any that comes by staying at home, though this may include the trifling items of insults, beating and starvation. Liddy, if you ever marry – God forbid that you ever should – you’ll find yourself in a fearful situation; but mind this, don’t you flinch. Stand your ground and be cut to pieces. (299)

In a deeply patriarchal society, where married women are seen as belonging to their husbands in the sense of being their rightful property, it seems illusory to Bathsheba that leaving her husband would result in anything as desirable as freedom. On the contrary, for a woman in Victorian Britain such an act would mean enduring consequences that are so severe that it appears preferable to Bathsheba to stay in a home where one is exposed to “insults, beating and starvation” – which is, as feminists have long pointed out, a sadly appropriate description of the kinds of home in which many women have been forced to live (Blunt and Dowling 125–126). In short, true to the belief so memorably expressed in the slogan that ‘the personal is political,’ feminist critics have explored the extent to which the private space of the home is in fact intricately related to, and indeed inseparable from, the gendered division of the public sphere characteristic of patriarchal society.³⁵

One key historical moment in the construction of modern gender difference is the so-called Age of Enlightenment. Jean-Jaques Rousseau, for instance, argued that women were by nature made to be subjugated, dependent on the judgment of men, and unsuited to abstract and speculative thought (*Émile* 411, 418, and 448) – views vehemently opposed even at the time (e.g. by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*). As Dorinda Outram points

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³⁵ For a highly accessible introduction to feminist criticism see Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism.*
out, the ideas of philosophers like Rousseau attempted to limit women’s sphere to the domestic world, and some historians suggest that industrialization contributed to such a ‘sexual division of labor.’ The association of women with the domestic sphere in fact preceded the period of industrialization, and as Outram notes the true Enlightenment innovation was its use of medical or biological ‘evidence’ to naturalize earlier ideas about gender difference (91). At the same time, Outram continues, women in fact assumed eminently important functions in the creation and maintenance of an Enlightenment public sphere, both as hosts of salons and as authors (94–96). Accordingly, critics like Amanda Vickery have cautioned against the assumption that men and women truly lived in entirely ‘separate spheres’ (413; see Sharon Marcus 6–7; Michael McKeon, The Secret History of Domesticity 168–170).

Nevertheless, there are of course countless literary texts that evoke this ideology of separate spheres, from little-known Victorian novels like Annie Lucas’s The City and the Castle (“[F]rom the calm, tender eyes of a noble, loving wife, shone the faithful, comprehensive love, that makes the light of an earthly home”; 427) to African American interwar classics like Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (“She’s uh woman and her place is in de home”; 69). Similarly, Ania Loomba has shown that in nationalist struggles against colonial masters, women are “usually cast as mothers or wives, and are called upon to literally and figuratively reproduce the nation” (180). Male nationalists have, in other words, often deployed women’s supposedly private position in the family home for eminently public purposes. The key feminist insight is, in short, that in the critical analysis of home, we need to pay close attention to the way in which home participates in, and perhaps even underpins, the gendering of social space (including the public-private divide).

In the case of E. T., for instance, Phyllis Deutsch argues that Elliott’s mother, Mary, is systematically devalued as a character as part of the film’s promotion of a patriarchal agenda. Deutsch observes, among other things, that the male children in the film never blame the absent father for their parents’ separation. Instead, they lovingly remember the father while directing feelings of frustration at their mother. Moreover, according to Deutsch the film emphasizes Mary’s inadequacy as a single parent in a scene where she calls the police because Elliott has temporarily gone missing:

[A] policeman grills Mary trying to find out if anything has happened in the family that might have caused her son to run away. Mary tearfully replies that her husband has gone and that “it hasn’t been easy on the children.” Clearly, she’s the one at fault: she’s at home and not doing a proper job raising the kids. […] In the viewer’s mind,
daddy’s departure is subliminally excusable: would you want to live with such an unstable woman? (12–13)

The film, Deutsch continues, in effect portrays Mary as a comic buffoon who “constantly misses the obvious,” and the film’s religious infrastructure only serves to support this misogynist bias because it moves “from father to king to God with sweeping grandeur,” leaving “a lot of troubled women in its wake” (12). If Mary, by the end of the film, does seem more emotionally stable, then for Deutsch this is not a sign of her progress as a woman, but instead appears as related to a “nice male scientist” who stands next to Mary in the movie’s final scene (13). All homes, in short, need a competent mother, but for Deutsch E. T. makes the sexist point that female competence ultimately depends on the presence of a male – and although Deutsch’s account of the portrayal of Mary may be somewhat too scathing, her argument certainly supports William Alexander’s more cautious claim that the film’s “sexual politics are not the most advanced” (27).

Crucially, feminism’s insistence that the privacy of the home is inseparable from societal structures of domination constitutes its most direct link to the Marxist tradition, according to which social alienation necessarily affects a person’s entire being. In a sense, this Marxian insight is already encapsulated in the etymology of the word ‘economy,’ which nowadays refers predominantly to public activities in the capitalist market, but which originally derives from the management of the oikos: the Ancient Greek term for ‘household’ or ‘family’ (OED; see McKeon, The Secret History of Domesticity 7–8). Moreover, the importance for classic Marxism to pay close attention to the material shape of the home is evident in Friedrich Engels’s The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844:

I assert that thousands of industrious and worthy people – far worthier and more to be respected than all the rich of London – [...] find themselves in a condition unworthy of human beings; and that every proletarian, everyone, without exception, is exposed to a similar fate without any fault of his own and in spite of every possible effort.
But in spite of all this, they who have some kind of a shelter are fortunate, fortunate in comparison with the utterly homeless. In London fifty thousand human beings get up every morning, not knowing where they are to lay their heads at night. (43–44)

The poor are either homeless or live in the most unworthy conditions, and Engels insists that in such filthy circumstances “only a physically degenerate race, robbed of all humanity, degraded, reduced morally and physically to bes-tiality, could feel comfortable and at home” (75). Engels argues, then, that the industrial proletariat suffers from such precarious conditions at home that their humanity itself threatens to become deformed.

Meanwhile, if Engels focuses on the material conditions in workers’ homes, Marx turns his attention to the process of production that, he argues, reduces the workers’ sense of belonging or being at home. According to Marx, the force underlying proletarians’ sense of unbelonging is their continual experience of estranged or alienated labor:

What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor?

First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside of himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction

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of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it. (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 74; original emphasis)³⁷

Marx thus suggests that all humans have a right to feel at home when at work – indeed, that the freedom to choose one’s work according to one’s abilities and desires constitutes the very essence of humanity as such (whereas animals are not in general able to make such choices; *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 74–75).³⁸ However, in Marx’s view, for the vast majority, the capitalist system of production reduces work to a mere means of survival – i.e. to its exchange-value – which in turn leaves the experience of work devoid of any use-value: of the specifically human pleasure that one can gain through creative self-expression.

In the case of *E. T.*, the effects of a social system where exchange-value trumps use-value can be seen most clearly in the technocratic approach of most of the film’s adults to non-human life. The scene at school in which Elliott and his classmates are set the task of anesthetizing and dissecting frogs, for instance, confronts us with a society that inoculates its children with a disregard for other life-forms in the name of scientific knowledge: perfect evidence for Louis Al-

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³⁷ The German original runs: “Worin besteht nun die Entäusserung der Arbeit? / Erstens, dass die Arbeit dem Arbeiter äußerlich ist, d.h. nicht zu seinem Wesen gehört, dass er sich daher in seiner Arbeit nicht bejaht, sondern verneint, nicht wohl, sondern unglücklich fühlt, keine freie physische und geistige Energie entwickelt, sondern seine Physis abkasteit und seinen Geist ruiniert. Der Arbeiter fühlt sich daher erst ausser der Arbeit bei sich und in der Arbeit ausser sich. Zu Hause ist er, wenn er nicht arbeitet und wenn er arbeitet, ist er nicht zu Haus. Seine Arbeit ist daher nicht freiwillig, sondern gezwungen, Zwangsarbeit. Sie ist daher nicht die Befriedigung eines Bedürfnisses, sondern sie ist nur ein Mittel, um Bedürfnisse ausser ihr zu befriedigen” (*Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte* 514; original emphasis).

³⁸ See Marx’s remarks in the third volume of *Capital*: “[T]he realm of freedom does not commence until the point is passed where labor under the compulsion of necessity and of external utility is required. […] Just as the savage must wrestle with nature, in order to satisfy his wants, in order to maintain his life and reproduce it, so civilized man has to do it, and he must do it in all forms of society and under all possible modes of production. […] There] always remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human power, which is its own end, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can flourish only upon that realm of necessity as its basis” (*Capital* 954–955). The German original runs: “Das Reich der Feiheit beginnt in der Tat erst da, wo das Arbeiten, das durch Not und äussere Zweckmässigkeit bestimmt ist, aufhört […]. Wie der Wilde mit der Natur ringen muss, um seine Bedürfnisse zu befriedigen, um sein Leben zu erhalten und zu reproduzieren, so muss es der Zivilisierte, und er muss es in allen Gesellschaftsformen und unter allen möglichen Produktionsweisen. […] Es bleibt] immer ein Reich der Notwendigkeit. Jenseits desselben beginnt die menschliche Kraftentwicklung, die sich als Selbstzweck gilt, das wahre Reich der Freiheit, das aber nur auf jenem Reich der Notwendigkeit als seiner Basis aufblühen kann” (*Das Kapital* 355).
thussner’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 connoître 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 nôtre état présent” (Ivii – Iviii; 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

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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.42 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)43

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42 See Evetts-Secker 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-

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.
sporic homes is greatly facilitated by easy access to particular types of media and communication (206; see Manning 160). Moreover, given the importance for diasporic communities of everyday rituals of food preparation and consumption (Blunt and Dowling 216), it is clear that those who cannot afford the foodstuffs required are also excluded from communal rituals. We will revisit such considerations of the link between community, rituals, and forms of communication – as well as humankind’s relation to the natural world (e.g. through the construction of a pastoral space) – in the discussion in chapter six of Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides.*

**Knowing Home: The Uses and Abuses of Defamiliarization**

By way of concluding this introductory chapter, we need to explore briefly the importance of conventions for establishing a sense of home (as well as, more generally, the relation between home, familiarity, and knowledge). Commenting on the role of conventions, Theano S. Terkenli insists that it is precisely through repetition, routine, and ritual that we turn places into homes:

[H]abits that repetitively unfold in specific contexts differentiate these locales or circumstances from the rest of the known world. [...] Over time an individual develops numerous behavioral, cognitive, and affective routines by investing resources and emotional commitment. The same process occurs at a group level in the creation of a collective home in the form of a common cultural background and a common homeland. (326)

The conventions and routines of home thus allow us to save both cognitive and affective energies, thus making it possible for us to employ these psychic energies for other purposes. This idea is not of recent origin, for as early as 1815, Percy Bysshe Shelley argued in his essay “On Life” that the “wonder of our being” is in a sense far too great, and that therefore we depend on a “mist of familiarity” that shields us “from an astonishment which would otherwise absorb and overawe” (633). In other words, the limited economy of psychic life renders familiarity eminently desirable.

At the same time, however, too much familiarity may blind us to the world around us, which is why the Russian Formalists and others before them insisted on a need for carefully administered doses of defamiliarization. The concept of defamiliarization or *ostranenie* (‘making strange’) was introduced by Victor Shklovsky in 1917 in an essay entitled “Art as Technique.” In this essay, Shklovsky suggests that when “perception becomes habitual,” it retreats “into the area of the unconsciously automatic” (19). To combat the resulting mental numbness, art must attempt to ‘de-habitualize’ perception:
The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (20)

According to Shklovsky, it is the form in which an object is presented in the work of art that forces us to perceive this object as if we were “seeing it for the first time” (21). In this way, defamiliarization may reveal the strangeness that lies hidden at the heart of the familiar – an idea that has prompted Nicholas Royle to observe that defamiliarization bears more than a passing resemblance both to Freud’s notion of the uncanny and to the Heideggerian concept of existential angst (4). Likewise, Royle points out, the idea that defamiliarization may revolutionize our way of perceiving the world underpins Bertolt Brecht’s concept of a Verfremdungs- or alienation effect (5).45 This point, too, had already been developed by Percy Bysshe Shelley, in his 1821 essay “A Defence of Poetry”:

[Poetry] strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms.

[... I]t purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration. (698)

For Shelley, as for the Russian Formalists, it is poetry or art that re-infuses life and vitality into a universe annihilated by repetition, tearing the veil of familiarity from our eyes and thus allowing us to experience – and know – the world anew and, therefore, more profoundly.

In fact, the idea of familiarity as a threat to real understanding goes back even further, to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who claims, in the Preface to his Phenomenology of Spirit, that “the familiar, just because it is familiar, is not cognitively understood” (18; § 31).46 Indeed, Hegel even posits a need for the style of truly philosophical writing to be so unfamiliar and difficult that such texts might have to be read repeatedly before they can be understood (39; § 63–65). Importantly, whereas Shelley and the Russian Formalists tend to see in defami-

45 See also Jacques Rancière: “[I]t is in the moments when the real world wavers and seems to reel into mere appearance, more than in the slow accumulation of day-to-day experiences, that it becomes possible to form a judgement about the world” (19).

46 The German original runs: “Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es bekannt ist, nicht erkannt” (24).
liarization the essence of ‘poetry’ or ‘literariness’ – i.e. a primarily aesthetic technique – for Hegel it is a necessary step in the acquisition of true knowledge as such, and thus not strictly speaking ‘merely’ an artistic, but instead a philosophical enterprise. In a sense, it is this idea that Oscar Wilde picks up on in his dialogue “The Critic as Artist,” where one of the interlocutors suggests:

An age that has no criticism is either an age in which art is immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types, or an age that possesses no art at all. [...] There has never been a creative age that has not been critical also. For it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. (254)

For Wilde’s speaker as much as for Hegel, the new, unexpected, and unfamiliar is thus not the effect of the creative impulse, but instead the product of the “critical faculty.”

In E. T. there is at least one scene that illustrates perfectly how it is possible implicitly to critique a particular state of affairs by confronting the audience with the familiar as seen through unfamiliar eyes. In the scene in question, Elliott tries to explain the contents of his room to E. T., but for the audience it is clear that the alien cannot but find Elliott’s explanations confusing:

Coke, see? We drink it. It’s, uh, it’s a drink. You know... food. [Showing E. T. two action figures.] These are toys. These are little men. This is Greedo, and then this is Hammerhead. [...] And look, they can even have wars. Look at this. [Taking two plastic fishes, a smaller one and a shark.] And look, fish. The fish eat the fish food. And the shark eats the fish. But nobody eats a shark. See, this is Pez. Candy. See, you eat it. You put the candy in here, and then when you lift up the head, the candy comes out, and you can eat it! You want some? [Pointing to his peanut-shaped piggybank.] Oh, this is a peanut. You eat it. But you can’t eat this one, ’cause this is fake. This is money. See? We put the money in the peanut. You see? Bank. You see? [Showing E. T. a tiny toy car.] And then this is a car. This is what we get around in. [Offering the toy car to E. T.] You see? (Mathison 68–69)

What on earth, for instance, is E. T. to make of the idea that we “put the money in the peanut”? And how is he to understand Elliott’s explanation that “this is a car. This is what we get around in” – given the fact that Elliott is showing him a toy car, which is far too small for any human to get around in? This notably comic scene in E. T. is, in short, also an exact application of one technique of defamiliarization that Shklovsky identifies in Tolstoy: making the familiar seem strange by prompting the audience to see things from an unfamiliar point of view, for example a horse’s (21) – or, as in our case, an extra-terrestrial’s. Sud-
denly we see the strangeness at the heart of a boy’s room: it harbors fantasies of war – the fighting action figures – and generally reflects a world where the small fish are eaten by the sharks, and which, already, revolves around money and, of course, cars: that ultimate symbol of individual freedom through consumption. Terry Eagleton thus rightly insists that we “can engage with the wider world simply by recording what goes on at home” (The English Novel 322) – provided that we manage to see the familiar as if we were perceiving it for the first time.

At the same time, even if we accept that defamiliarization is a necessary technique for any critical enterprise – very much including the present one – we should not therefore see it as the binary opposite of a desire to belong. Rather, as Hegel suggests, the ultimate “aim of knowledge is to divest the objective world that stands opposed to us of its strangeness, and, as the phrase is, to find ourselves at home in it” – and this, for Hegel, involves a dialectical return to belonging as a complement to previous acts of self-alienation (Logic 289; § 194).

It is, presumably, the same idea that the German poet Novalis wanted to express in a frequently quoted aphorism: “Philosophy is actually homesickness – the urge to be everywhere at home” (Philosophical Writings 135; original emphasis).

To relinquish the quest for a sense of home altogether would thus defeat the very purpose of defamiliarization. Moreover, as Terry Eagleton observes, to indulge in the denigration of home, the familiar, and the everyday is tantamount to accepting a peculiarly modernist bias against the common life: “In the transition from realism to modernism, a fascination with the texture of everyday living gives way to a mandarin scepticism of it. Common experience is now the locus of illusion, not of truth” (Trouble with Strangers 277).

To assume, that is to say, that everything about the places we call home is false and coercive is just as problematic as blindly to accept everything that is familiar. When studying home, we may therefore want to bear in mind the words of Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s Inspector Bärlach when he talks about the idea of loving one’s country: “One should not be ashamed of one’s love, [...] only it has to be stern and critical.

47 The German original runs: “Beim Erkennen ist es überhaupt darum zu tun, der uns gegenüberstehenden objektiven Welt ihre Fremdheit abzustreifen, uns, wie man zu sagen pflegt, in dieselbe zu finden” (Die Wissenschaft der Logik 351; § 195).
48 “Die Philosophie ist eigentlich Heimweh, ein Trieb überall zu Hause zu sein” (Schriften 179).
49 For an interesting recent overview of ideas concerning the concept of the everyday, see Bryony Randall, “A Day’s Time: The One-Day Novel and the Temporality of the Everyday” (2016).
otherwise it turns into the love of a monkey” (183; my translation).^{50} Home-making requires patience as well as, at times, critical effort. But ought we therefore to privilege the pain of unbelonging? It is this tension between alienation and belonging that lies at the heart of the six readings that follow, starting with *Moby-Dick* in chapter one.

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^{50} The German original runs: “Man soll sich seiner Liebe nicht schämen, […] nur muss sie streng und kritisch sein, sonst wird sie eine Affenliebe.” In English translations, the inspector’s last name is usually given as Barlach.