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). 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).

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.25 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)26

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.27 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

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25 The fact that the color of E.T.’s skin cannot simply be dismissed as a random and insignificant feature is nicely summarized by Adam Roberts, who observes in his study of science fiction: “Aliens, as popular consciousness knows, are differently coloured: green-skinned, blue-skinned or (more latterly) grey-skinned. Skin colour, in other words, is reflected by SF [i.e. science fiction] as the key vector of difference” (105).

26 Alexander in fact argues that E. T. as a whole is a racist fantasy in which the symbolic representative of the oppressed turns out to be reassuringly “good-hearted and harmless,” and is ultimately sent “back to where he came from” (33). I have tried to defend Spielberg’s film against this particular charge in my essay “Resisting Governmental Illegalization,” and would only like to add here that the association of E.T. with Jesus is potentially anti-imperialist in its implications, for as Terry Eagleton notes, Christ was murdered “by the Roman state and its supine colonial lackeys, who took fright at his message of mercy and justice, as well as at his enormous popularity with the poor, and did away with him in a highly volatile political situation. It did not help that a number of his closest friends were probably Zealots or anti-imperialist revolutionaries” (Trouble with Strangers 289). However, for a reading that is closer to Alexander’s, see Robin Wood (160).

27 The suburban home and lifestyle of Elliott’s family in E.T. is, of course, inextricably entangled with the history of race relations in the United States. For a more detailed discussion of this problem, see chapter six of the present study.
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.)