

Back to the Future: In 1980s America family values were perceived to be in moral decline. How was this decline represented in American popular culture and what was the suggested remedy?

JEREMY MAYES

MHIS365 From the Beats to Big Brother

1980s American popular culture represented the moral decline of family values through the portrayal of dysfunctional families in films. A prime example of popular culture critiquing this perception of moral decline and remedy was the film *Back to the Future* (1985). This essay will provide an overview of the film *Back to the Future*, highlighting the representation of moral decline in family values and if it offers any solutions to the problem. The next step will be to understand why 1950s nostalgia was a popular theme in films during the 1980s. This will be followed by an examination of the 1960s and 1970s socio-political landscape. Lastly, to analyse the rise of neoconservative politics with the establishment of the New Right and influences of Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) as portrayed in *Back to the Future*.

Back to the Future is a sci-fi time travel story set in 1985 and is about a dysfunctional middle class family - the McFlys.¹ Marty McFly is a precocious teenager and the main character in the film.² Marty being the youngest child looks to his parents and siblings for support, but unfortunately they are ill-equipped to fulfil their roles.³ For example, Marty's mother Lorraine is a prude, priggish and opinionated but also an alcoholic, his siblings are self-absorbed, lazy and disinterested in his life, his father George is non-patriarchal, emasculated, weak willed, and gullible.⁴ George is looked down upon by his peers and his family.⁵ The weakness of George is portrayed as the primary reason for the family's dysfunctionality and their precarious financial

¹ J. Maslin, J, "In 'Future,' Boy Returns to the Past." *The New York Times*, July 3, 1985, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/03/movies/in-future-boy-returns-to-the-past.html>

² Ibid.,

³ D. Wittenberg, "Oedipus Multiplex - the Subject as a Time Travel Film: Two Readings of Back to the Future", *Discourse*, 28, 2/3 (2006): p. 53.

⁴ Steven Spielberg, *Back to the Future*, (Universal Pictures, 1983)

⁵ Ibid.

situation.⁶ Marty has a substitute father figure who turns out to be eccentric inventor Doc Emmett (Doc).⁷ With the scene set, the restoration of George as the family's patriarch becomes key to ensuring the future of the family by Marty rescuing them out of moral decline.

Marty mistakenly travels back in time to 1955 in Doc's time machine, inadvertently altering the past and therefore his own future.⁸ Marty's time travel sees him take the role as the proto-father who intervenes in his teenage mother and father's floundering relationship.⁹ Marty's re-engineering of his parent's relationship in 1955 enables him to 'remake' the McFlys into a model neoconservative family of the 1980s.¹⁰ Marty returns to 1985 and awakens to find his interventions in the past has improved his family.¹¹ He finds out that he owns his dream 4x4 truck, his parent's drive an expensive BMW, the house is richly decorated with material items such as electronic devices and artworks.¹² His siblings are hard working professionals, his mother and father are well dressed, slim and happily engaging with the family.¹³ His mother Lorraine is no longer an alcoholic and his father George is the patriarch.¹⁴ When Marty is asked if everything is alright by his family - Marty replies; "everything is great", implying that this 'new' family is better and more desirable than the previous.¹⁵ Through a neoconservative narrative and visual display, Marty represents an individual who has been able to improve his future and his family by his virtuous moral actions that he carried out in the past. Marty's time travel back to a nostalgic 1955 America helped save himself and his family from the decline in family values through self-determination and self-belief. This nostalgic view of 1950s was an ubiquitous theme in 1980s popular culture.

⁶ M. Kinder, "Back to the Future in the 80s with Fathers & Sons, Supermen & PeeWees, Gorillas & Toons." *Film Quarterly*, 42, 4 (1989): p. 5.

⁷ D. Wittenberg, "Oedipus Multiplex- the Subject as a Time Travel Film" (2006): p. 53.

⁸ M. Kinder, "Back to the Future in the 80s with Fathers & Sons, Supermen & PeeWees, Gorillas & Toons." *Film Quarterly*, 42, 4 (1989): p. 4.

⁹ Sarah Harwood, *Family Fictions: Representations of the Family in 1980s Hollywood Cinema* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 75.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹¹ D. Wittenberg, "Oedipus Multiplex - the Subject as a Time Travel Film" (2006): p. 60.

¹² Steven Spielberg, *Back to the Future*, (Universal Pictures, 1983)

¹³ *Ibid.*,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*,

Nostalgia is a term used to reflect and remember the ‘good old days’, but it also encompasses a sense of loss connected to the past.¹⁶ As Daniel Marcus writes in his book *Happy Days and Wonder Years*, like the television program *Happy Days*, the film *Back to the Future* reflects the carefree lifestyle of America during the 1950s and early 1960s.¹⁷ *Back to the Future* enables the audience to go back in time before the disruptions of contemporary life such as a loss of confidence, high unemployment, fragmentation and erosion of the nuclear family, increased violence and drug abuse in the streets and homes of America.¹⁸ *Back to the Future* critiques how 1950s values was a possible solution on combating contemporary problems facing 1980s America. David Sirota wrote in *Back to Our Future* (2011), that other films such as *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Footloose* (1984), *The Right Stuff* (1984) and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986) also evoked 1950s nostalgia throughout the 1980s.¹⁹ This popular theme of 1950s nostalgia was an obvious choice for film writers and makers as it was perceived as a relatively innocent period in history. For example, there was no depression of the 1920s and 1930s, no World War II of the 1940s, no Vietnam War, counter culture or Watergate as experienced in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s.²⁰ While it is true there was a general fear of communism during the Cold War, it did not affect the day to day lives of ordinary Americans. The 1950s was seen (especially upon reflection) as a period of innocence and prosperity. The director of *Back to the Future* Robert Zemeckis (1954-) said that the 1950s was selected because it was a relatively calm period coinciding with the increasing presence and influence of the ‘teenager’.²¹ This was for the first time, a period where teenagers had money in their pockets giving them the freedom to make choices for themselves in a burgeoning consumerist society.²² This reflected that individuals had choices and could become independently wealthy without government support or interference. In *Back to the Future*, the time juxtaposition of 1955 and

¹⁶ Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*,

¹⁹ David Sirota, *Back to the Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now – Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Everything* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011), p. 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*,

²¹ M. Stein, “Back to the Future: Director Bob’s Zemeckis’ Tale of a Teen Time Travel Finds Humour in the Past.” *Fantastic Films #46*, Oct (1985): p. 43.

²² David Sirota, *Back to the Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now* (2011), p. 9.

1985 was used to show contemporary teenagers like Marty that they had the same fears, hopes, and dreams as 1950s teenagers. There were also several overt references to 1980s commercialism. Such as Marty's Calvin Klein underwear and when he asks for a drink in the café, Marty - "gimme a tab", barman replies - "can't give you a tab unless you order somthin", Marty says - "gimme a Pepsi Free", to the barman replies - "if you wanna a Pepsi you gonna pay for it".²³ Apart from the product references in the scenes, it also tells the audience that if you want something then you have to earn it. In *Back to the Future* Marty is this quintessential teenager who is able to make good use of the challenges and opportunities put in his way.²⁴ If Marty was able to choose the right path, then so too could the rest of America. It was this narrative that permeated throughout the later part of the 1970s that neoconservative politicians and social groups began to raise concerns of the moral decline of family values.

In 1979, Democratic President Jimmy Carter addressed the nation with his *Crisis of Confidence* speech. His speech was centered on the OPEC oil crisis but he also stated that the crisis was more than just about energy.²⁵ Carter said that it was also about the "erosion of confidence that is gradually destroying the social fabric of America.....with a growing disrespect for government, churches and for schools."²⁶ Dubbed the 'malaise speech' by the media, Carter implied that it was the American people that had failed, but critics argued that it was the American President who had actually been found lacking.²⁷ Reagan seized on this by offering weary Americans an alternative, a trip down memory lane. He preached that America had been demoralised by the counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s, suffered from ongoing high inflation, crushed by big government, and weakened by its foreign policy.²⁸ On a domestic level neoconservative groups saw the 1970s Equal Rights Amendment (ERA - amendment for equal pay regardless of sex) as an attempt by feminists to undermine the value of the stay at home

²³ Steven Spielberg, *Back to the Future*, (Universal Pictures, 1983)

²⁴ M. Stein, "Back to the Future: Director Bob's Zemeckis." (1985): p. 43.

²⁵ Jimmy Carter's televised address to the nation, 'Crisis of Confidence address to the nation', July 15, 1979, available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KC0d-qWZB_g

²⁶ Ibid.,

²⁷ Andrew Busch, *Reagan's Victory: The Presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the New Right* (United States of America: University Press of Kansas, 2005), p. 1.

²⁸ Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), P. 12.

mother and housewife.²⁹ This was in conjunction with increasing unemployment that saw men finding it harder to provide for their families.³⁰ Neoconservatives saw this as proof that feminists were indirectly emasculating men like George McFly, removing them from established patriarch roles. The McFlys were a portrayal of what was seen by neoconservatives as a family in moral decline. The antecedents of which were directly blamed on the last two decades of liberalisation.³¹

The 'New Right' of neoconservative politics began to gain influence in the later half on the 1970s after two decades of socio-political liberalisation.³² Neoconservative politician Reagan, evangelical leader Reverend Jerry Falwell (1933-2007) and social group leader Phyllis Schlafly (1924-) highlighted the counter cultures of the 1960s and 1970s as the defining reason for the decline in family values.³³ Specifically, the feminist movement, the proposed ERA, increased government social spending, greater government interference through regulation, stagflation, and the lingering impact of the Vietnam War provided the evidence that 1980s America was worse off compared to the 1950s.³⁴ Falwell once said "our nation's internal problems are direct results of her spiritual condition" and "It is now time that moral American's awakened to the fact that our future depends upon how we stand on moral issues"³⁵ As with Falwell, Reagan's vision for America was in direct opposition of current modern-day secularism which discarded tried and tested Christian family values.³⁶ Reagan argued that adultery, teenage sex, pornography, abortion and illicit drugs is evidence that America is in need for a 'moral renewal'.³⁷ In *Back to the Future*, the 1985 Hill Valley town centre showed the signs it was in moral and physical decline. There is graffiti all over the institutional buildings such as the town hall and school showing a level of disrespect and delinquency to authority.³⁸ The streets

²⁹ US National Archives, 'Martha Griffiths and the Equal Rights Amendment', available from <https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/griffiths/>

³⁰ Sarah Harwood, *Family Fictions: Representations of the Family in 1980s* (1997), p. 43.

³¹ *Ibid.*,

³² John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 171.

³³ Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years* (2004), pp. 36-39.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³⁵ John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (2005), p. 173.

³⁶ Ronald Reagan's Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida: March 8, 1983, available from <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/30883b.htm>

³⁷ *Ibid.*,

³⁸ Steven Spielberg, *Back to the Future*, (Universal Pictures, 1983)

are littered with rubbish and there is a general appearance of wear and tear.³⁹ Similarly, the town's people also show signs of moral decline with tramps sleeping on benches and delinquent teenagers. The bank and general store have moved away and been replaced by a loan shark, pawn shop, adult book shop and a cinema showing a XXX rated movies.⁴⁰ This is in direct contrast to the 1955 Hill Valley. Here the town centre has manicured lawns, a 'Welcoming sign' laden with insignias from local community groups and clubs such as, Rotary, Lions, and the Camp Fire Girls to name a few.⁴¹ The contrast between these images is central to the 1980 narrative that America, like the Hill Valley community, is in moral decline compared to the 1950s.⁴²

Reagan said that after World War II America began to build a prosperous and successful nation but the following decades took its toll on America.⁴³ As Reagan's popularity increased he was named *Time Magazine's* '1980 - Man of the Year' with an article saying that "Intellectually, emotionally, Reagan lives in the past" and that he believed that his past is the way of the future for America.⁴⁴ Reagan used 1950s nostalgia to demonstrate how much America had suffered from a moral decline in family values.⁴⁵ He successfully went on to win the 1981 presidential election. In *Back to the Future* the first thing that Marty sees when he walks into the 1955 town centre of Hill Valley is a cinema billboard.⁴⁶ It is advertising '*Cattle Queen of Montana*' (1954), which starred Reagan.⁴⁷ The link made in *Back to the Future* between Reagan the actor and Reagan the President is quite clear. This is repeated when the 1955 Doc asks Marty "who is the President of the US in 1985", Marty – "Ronald Reagan", Doc – "Ronald Reagan the actor?" (in disbelief).⁴⁸ What is less certain is whether the Reagan film was deliberately chosen. Reagan plays an US Cavalry servicemen that comes to the rescue of a female land owner being

³⁹ Ibid.,

⁴⁰ Ibid.,

⁴¹ Ibid.,

⁴² Ibid.,

⁴³ Ronald Reagan's 1980 Election Eve Address "A Vision for America", available from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=85199>

⁴⁴ David Sirota, *Back to the Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now* (2011), p. 11.

⁴⁵ Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years* (2004), p. 36.

⁴⁶ Steven Spielberg, *Back to the Future*, (Universal Pictures, 1983)

⁴⁷ Ibid.,

⁴⁸ Ibid.,

persecuted by Native Indians and unscrupulous land barons.⁴⁹ Reagan's character saves the woman and the farming community from corruption and violence.⁵⁰ It is possible that *Back to the Future* could be presenting this billboard to show Reagan not only as the actor and President but also as America's leading 1980s patriarch.⁵¹ With Reagan's neoconservative economic policies aptly named 'Reaganomics', it was seen that he would provide the opportunity to reverse the moral decline in family values making America as prosperous as it was in the 1950s.

Reaganomics was centered on the policy of 'small government'. This saw Reagan cutting taxes, reducing government legislation and slashing social welfare.⁵² Reagan believed that people who used welfare were physically and morally weak. This ideology stems back to Reagan's childhood experiences with his alcoholic father.⁵³ Reagan's father told him that all men were created equal and ambition is what really sets a man apart.⁵⁴ Reagan interpreted this to mean that his father's drinking showed that he was a weak and an immoral man who lacked ambition and was therefore a failure.⁵⁵ In *Back to the Future*, Marty's mother is an alcoholic who is more concerned about her vodka than parenting.⁵⁶ Reagan believed that people had to solve their problems themselves and to not be reliant on government handouts.⁵⁷ Reaganomics was about giving individuals the opportunity to make something out of their lives as illustrated by Marty who travelled back in time and successfully transformed his parents from an alcoholic mother and emasculated father into a 'desirable' housewife and patriarch.

During the 1980s American popular culture films were a plethora of representations of individuals, communities and families that displayed the moral decline of family values. *Back to the Future* was a time travel story based on a 1985 middle class dysfunctional family exhibiting

⁴⁹ A. Webster, "The Screen in Review - At the Globe: 'Cattle Queen of Montana' (1954)." *New York Times*, October 24, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/movies/movie/8665/Cattle-Queen-of-Montana/overview>

⁵⁰ Ibid.,

⁵¹ Ibid.,

⁵² Michael Schaller, *Right Turn: American Life in the Reagan-Bush Era 1980-1992* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 147.

⁵³ R. Gilbert, "Ronald Reagan's Presidency: The Impact of an Alcoholic Parent." *Political Psychology*, 29, 5 (2008): p. 742.

⁵⁴ Ibid.,

⁵⁵ Ibid.,

⁵⁶ Steven Spielberg, *Back to the Future*, (Universal Pictures, 1983)

⁵⁷ R. Gilbert, "Ronald Reagan's Presidency" (2008): p. 743.

moral decline. The director Zemeckis said the 1950s was selected because it was a relatively calm period and the beginning of the age of the teenager. The liberalisation policies of the 1960s and 1970s pursued by counter cultures such as the feminist movement started to face opposition from neoconservatives such as religious and political leaders like Falwell and Reagan. Reagan was concerned about the moral decline of family values which he perceived was caused by government interference. Reaganomics such as small government limited welfare and let the individual take responsibility and control of their lives. This philosophy can be summed up with the final words by Doc in *Back to the Future* which was also repeated by Reagan himself in a speech about his vision for the future. "Roads, where we are going, we don't need roads."⁵⁸

Bibliography

Busch, Andrew. *Reagan's Victory: The Presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the New Right*. United States of America: University Press of Kansas, 2005.

Ehrman, John. *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

Gilbert, R. "Ronald Reagan's Presidency: The Impact of an Alcoholic Parent." *Political Psychology*, 29, 5 (2008): pp. 737-765.

Harwood, Sarah. *Family Fictions: Representations of the Family in 1980s Hollywood Cinema*. London: Macmillan Press, 1997.

Jimmy Carter's televised address to the nation, 'Crisis of Confidence address to the nation', July 15, 1979 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCOd-qWZB_g

Kinder, M. "Back to the Future in the 80s with Fathers & Sons, Supermen & PeeWees, Gorillas & Toons." *Film Quarterly*, 42, 4 (1989): pp. 2-11.

Marcus, Daniel. *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics*. London: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

⁵⁸ Ronald Reagan uses a 'Back to the Future' reference, available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10NSlp2g-xc>

Maslin, J. "In 'Future,' Boy Returns to the Past." *The New York Times*, July 3, 1985.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/03/movies/in-future-boy-returns-to-the-past.html>

Ronald Reagan's 1980 Election Eve Address "A Vision for America."

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=85199>

Ronald Reagan's Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida: March 8, 1983.

<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/30883b.htm>

Ronald Reagan uses a 'Back to the Future' reference,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10NSlp2g-xc>

Schaller, Michael. *Right Turn: American Life in the Reagan-Bush Era 1980-1992*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Sirota, David. *Back to the Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now – Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Everything*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2011.

Spielberg, Steven. *Back to the Future*. Universal Pictures, 1983.

Stein, M. "Back to the Future: Director Bob's Zemeckis' Tale of a Teen Time Travel Finds Humour in the Past." *Fantastic Films #46*, Oct, (1985): pp. 39-44.

Troy, Gil. *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005.

US National Archives, 'Martha Griffiths and the Equal Rights Amendment'

<https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/griffiths/>

Webster, A. "The Screen in Review - At the Globe: 'Cattle Queen of Montana' (1954)." *New York Times*, October 24, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/movies/movie/8665/Cattle-Queen-of-Montana/overview>

Wittenberg, D. "Oedipus Multiplex, or, the Subject as a Time Travel Film: Two Readings of Back to the Future", *Discourse*, 28, 2/3 (2006): pp. 51-77.