REAGAN'S ERA: BACK TO THE MACHO FUTURE

Sergio Hernández López
Universidad de La Laguna

ABSTRACT

The following paper aims to scrutinize the vision of traditional masculinity during the 1980s, Ronald Reagan's America, as proposed by director Robert Zemeckis in his celebrated film *Back to the Future* (1985). Jimmy Carter's legislation came to be thought of by the conservative discourse as one that was weakening and emasculating such a strong, vigorous, and masculine country as the U.S. was. Along this line, Reagan's responsibility to his country was to bring it back to its former glory, a time when family values and gender roles were clear, "sound" and "stable." Thus, it is with such a strong feeling of nostalgia for a lost past that *Back to the Future* appears as a most adequate text to analyze what the institutions of the time were trying to impart to its audience, rather than listen to what the film can tell us about such an audience. In this sense, this paper will be examining how, through the character of George McFly, each different time period in the film can be seen as a different legislation in the 1980s.

KEY WORDS: Gender studies, film studies, feminist criticism, masculinity, *Back to the Future*, political discourse, Ronald Reagan.

RESUMEN

El siguiente ensayo examina la percepción de los valores propios de la masculinidad tradicional durante los años ochenta del siglo XX y la América de Ronald Reagan, tal y como los propone el director Robert Zemeckis con su popular *Back to the Future* (1985). La legislatura de Jimmy Carter fue duramente criticada por el discurso conservador de la época; dichas críticas se basaban en la idea de que dicho presidente había debilitado y emasculado un país tan fuerte, vigoroso y masculino como Estados Unidos. Así, la responsabilidad de Reagan fue la de devolver su país a su antigua gloria, un tiempo en el que los valores familiares y los roles de género eran claros, "sanos" y "estables." De este modo, es con tal sentimiento de nostalgia por un pasado perdido que *Back to the Future* aparece como un texto fílmico altamente adecuado para el análisis de lo que las instituciones trataban de decir a su público, y no simplemente de lo que el texto nos pueda contar de ese público. En este sentido, el presente ensayo examinará cómo, a través del personaje de Georfe McFly, cada período distinto que aparece en la película puede ser leído como una legislatura estadounidense diferente de la década de los ochenta.

KEY WORDS: estudios de género, estudios de cine, crítica feminista, masculinidad, *Back to the Future*, discurso político, Ronald Reagan.

The 1980s saw the rise of Ronald Reagan, former actor of the Hollywood titan, as a new conservative president at a time when public trust in liberal policies and politicians were utterly worn out. The very word "liberal" increasingly gained new connotations for a great deal of Americans and only a handful of them were positive. Liberalism had become, then, what Richard Weaver called a "devil term" or a "prime repellant" in a conservative jargon that would endeavor to weaken liberalism even more than it was at the time. This way, during the Reagan Era, liberal politics were on the verge on being completely deligitimized by the main body of American voters (Depoe 100). This discredited view of liberal politics was to survive until past Reagan's term, as exposed by Edsall and Edsall:

> By 1988, the perception of a link between the Democratic Party and controversial government policies on race, rights, and taxes had become imbedded in the conscious and unconscious memory of American politics – a perception still close enough to the surface to be accessible to political manipulation. This perception often exerted influence on an unarticulated level, a level at which the national Democratic party was still tied, in the minds of many voters, to the problems of crime, welfare, school failure, family dissolution, spreading urban squalor, an eroding work ethic, and global retreat. (qtd. Nadel 171)

In order to be able to examine Reagan's America from an ideological perspective, we need to pay heed to a specific set of themes that occupies the popular imaginary of its people; while, at the same time, it recognizes its conversion into something more tangible and "real." It is in this fashion that films appear as a particularly useful tool in analyzing collective consensus on American values, for its validity would be confirmed by the degree of acceptance or rejection the respective audience would grant it with; in other words, the general public would always support the cinema which they would feel identified with. Thus, such conversion of values is going to have its inception on the cinema screen by reshaping its audience's image of the nation. What is noteworthy of the American film production of the 1980s is what they would tell its audience, rather than what they could tell us about such an audience. Then, the film industry was to be used to reinforce the agenda of Reagan's politics. As put by Alan Nadel, "President Reagan's America [...] was a Hollywood moviefest in which America itself became the theater and television the ubiquitous projector" (13). In this sense, Reagan casted himself as the savior of the U.S. Lakoff speaks of this in the following terms: "[Americans] act modern, cool, and sophisticated. But underneath, we want a daddy, a king, a god, a hero, [...] a champion who will carry that lance and that sword into the field and fight for us" (qtd. Nadel 5). It was, then, in the search of this father/ hero figure that Hollywood plot lines and politics came to be so closely bonded to each other in the figure of Ronald Reagan.

The Reagan victories showed, once again, the power of populist discourse in America. His populism centered itself in attacking Jimmy Carter's big government as the perpetuator of a stagnant "status quo" in American society. The liberal politician and his politics were depicted by the opposition as being run by a "limou-

sine liberal," an upper-class elite away from the people he was ruling, imposing his views on cultural and social liberalism on the rest of America (Garry 67). Liberals, again, were losing face to the general public for what was perceived as a blatant and sanctimonious imbalance between their discourse and their praxis. For instance: on the one hand, Walter Mondale would advocate for social inclusiveness and change, while, on the other, he would still take his son to a private school away from any social "trouble" whatsoever.

The Carter administration had been a champion of affirmative action and judicial activism to favor minority interests. In contrast, the Reagan administration understood affirmative action as a policy of reverse discrimination against the American white majority (Mervin 67). This populist discourse aimed at appealing not minorities, but the bigger body of voters who did not really feel they were being properly represented by their liberal rulers. This way, a thick wall divided the Carter administration from its people. Tom Kemp discusses it as follows:

> Millions of people making up 'middle America' felt themselves overtaxed and over-regulated to support welfare-dodgers, and the inflated bureaucracy and politicians of Washington. Battered by inflation, victims of structural change, bewildered by the growth of crime, drug abuse and the so-called 'sexual revolution' (casual sex, pornography, abortion, homosexuality) as well as the AIDS epidemic; they made up a right-wing, populist groundswell which gave Reaganism its mass base. Convinced of the menace of Communism, it supported the military and was fervently nationalist. (Kemp 207)

The counter argument adopted by the conservative discourse was that the welfare state created by the liberals, far from removing poverty, entrenched it by basically creating a culture of dependency on the state and its subsidies (Hamby 359). Carter's administration was thus understood as an attack against the traditional individualistic values that had prevailed in the U.S. since the writing of the Declaration of Independence: there had been no place for Carter's socialist policies in America. This way, in Reagan's America there were no systemic problems: every single problem was to be seen as a mere setback that Americans could, quite straightforwardly, deal with just by "rolling up their sleeves and pitching in" (Sonderegger 15). Thus, in Reagan's America, there was no need for a minimum wage or even for the existence of a department of Housing and Urban Development, and the ever-increasing inequality between the lower and the upper classes was nothing but a reflection of hard work by the latter, and a lack of initiative on the part of the former (Sonderegger 15). That is, there was nothing wrong with society or with the state; everyone was responsible for his own fate, and not even the government had the power to co-opt anyone's pursuit of happiness. As explained by Gil Troy:

> Ronald Reagan was the candidate of 1950s' optimism, confident that the people who framed the Constitution, settled the West, freed the slaves, industrialized the continent, and crushed the Nazis could solve any problem. But Reagan believed that government was part of the problem, not the solution. (26)

That being so, Reagan's presidency was one of nostalgia, one whose main aim was to bring the United States back to the "good old days" when it was still humble and pure and you were in charge of your own life, not the state, whose intrusive methods ended up destroying the core values of American civic life leaving a country full of homeless people, dysfunctional families, feminism, and with a severely weakened international position. Reagan, as a film actor and television personality, was to be the knight protector of these long lost values; thus, as Garry Wills points out, "Reagan does not argue for American values; he embodies them" (5), as if had been taken from a Norman Rockwell illustration or a Jimmy Stewart film.

It is in this context that Robert Zemeckis' *Back to the Future* (1985) comes along. By analyzing this cultural product through the lens of President Reagan's policies and values, we can understand the way Hollywood films such as this one helps develop a strong sense of national identity. Throughout the following paragraphs I will be dealing with one of the most important aspects of America's mainstream values: the importance of keeping the traditional views of gender harmony within the family system. For it was generally perceived as a basic strategy for having a sound personal and public life Probably one of the most obvious examples we have for this widely accepted correlation is the typically American tradition by which candidates running for the presidency expose their family to the whole of the U.S. so as to suggest that if they are doing good with their family, they would do good as a president if elected. This also applies to *Back to the Future* with George McFly and the evolution of his personality forced by his son Marty. As we will see in the following paragraphs, this film supports the prevailing connection between having a good family and respecting gender roles at the same time with being blessed with public and economic success.

Thus, if we analyze the first quarter of the film in terms of traditional family values, it will present us Marty's family in 1985 as a completely unnatural, disordered, and dysfunctional one. Firstly, his brother is working at a fast-food restaurant, that is, masculinity in economic terms, as a breadwinner, is not possible for him. Secondly, his sister is having problems finding any dates, that is, the "naturally" agreed role in life that impels her to get married, have children, and take care of the household cannot be fulfilled. Thirdly, his uncle is in jail; fourthly, his mother is an alcoholic; and finally, his father is a wimp who gets abused by Biff, his supervisor at work, who, as we will learn later on in the film, has been abusing George since his adolescence. The whole family picture and the disapproving looks Marty gives to his father stand as a metaphor for the situation of America during the 1980s, the legacy of Jimmy Carter and his liberal policies. About this devastating impact on the institution of family, Allan Bakke wrote:

> The family, dissociated from many of its former community contacts, is now thrown in upon itself where conflict and confusion dominate and established relationship patterns have disintegrated. There is no comfort in the family circle. The breaking up of the family unit may be considered at this time by one or both of the parents since there is a present failure to receive satisfaction customarily expected of the family and very little prospect that the future will offer anything different. (qtd. Steinberg 122)

Some important gender roles have been reversed in the McFly family, the father lacks authority of any kind; he is a laughable and ridiculous character: he wheezes, he lacks self-confidence, he gets bullied, and he delights in *Three Stooges* comedies. To top it all, in relation with Lorraine, he would not take a central position at the table (which has traditionally been identified as the site of masculine domestic authority *par excellence*), he would let the mother do all the talking at dinner time, and he would even restrain himself in order not to swear. However, when talking about George as an emasculated character, the most absurd and unforgivable thing he has done is having altered the all so natural and universal order in all gender relations in film of "boy meets girl, boy gets the girl." In George and Lorraine's case, she falls in love with him after her father runs over him with the car; that is, she married him because she felt sorry for him. George McFly does not even fit in Lorraine's definition of what a man is supposed to be; she describes masculinity in the following terms: "I think a man should be strong so he can stand up for himself and protect the woman he loves" (Zemeckis 00:69). In other words, Lorraine, after describing, in terms of traditional masculinity, what is expected of a man, is leaving us with a clear image of what her husband is not.

Marty, however, appears as the sole model to follow in the McFly family for, as we will discuss later on, he is the one to carry out Reagan's revolution, the one who, just by "putting [his] mind to it, can accomplish anything" (Zemeckis 00:08), the one, under whose shoulders rests the burden of changing the world and restoring social (and gender) order. In this sense, Marty is the one who would reconcile the two seemingly opposite systems of the worlds of 1985 and 1955. He is the champion of Reagan's revolution, and only by taking control of his own life can he accomplish anything he sets out to do, regardless of the numerous family or social problems he may face. *Back to the Future*, by means of the developing relationship between George and Marty, father and son, is imbued with one of the biggest anxieties of the 1980s, that is, the anxiety of the duality continuity/ revolution, the former being typified by the emasculated father, and the latter, by the empowered son. Early in the film, the following dialogue takes place between the oppressive high school teacher and Marty as a foreshadowing of what is to happen at the end of the film:

> Mr. Strickland: You got a real attitude problem. You're a slacker. You remind me of your father when he went here. He was a slacker, too.
> Marty: Can I go now, Mr. Strickland?
> Mr. Strickland: I know that your band is on the roster for the dance auditions after school today. Why even bother? You don't have a chance. You're too much like your old man. No McFly ever amounted to anything in the history of Hill Valley.
> Marty: Yeah, well, history is going to change. (Zemeckis 00:07)

Marty is introduced as the herald of a new time, he does not know it at this point, but he is going to overcome the determinist and the apparently inescapable disadvantage of being a McFly and remake history. This implies a return to the American myth of masculine individualism; Marty is thus understood as the American Adam who can work out his own history by being different from his

ancestors. In other words, the American Dream is still possible (Nadel 73). Marty's views on music actually stand as a symbol of his being ahead of his time: his masculine values and lifestyle, though desirable and attractive, seem to be disregarded in his time, but "well, history is going to change." *Back to the Future*, then, projects one of Reagan's main political philosophies:

> In order to comprehend how Reagan can seem "just like you and me" without resembling anyone on earth, Machiavelli would have to sit through hours of bad old movies, pore over hundreds of dime novels and Horatio Alger stories, and otherwise school himself in the recurrent images of American myth. Only then would he perceive that Ronald Reagan is merely an anthology of the worst of American popular culture, edited for television. He comforts us, not by epitomizing what we are, but by reminding us of what we used to think we were or, perhaps, of what we think we used to be. In either case, his image is an eloquent symbol of reaction, forever promising the return of an illusory past. (Miller 80)

Thus, right in the same way that the average American citizen could identify with President Reagan, he would identify with the figure of Marty as well. *Back to the Future* presents us a male-centered reality in which it is the son who actively and adequately replaces the father and mends the situation. Women in general do not have a say in any of the truly significant parts of the film. This film rests upon the ideal that one "man" can change the world. And change is precisely what the film is about; Marty works to change some events, while at the same time, preventing some others from changing. Marty's actions in the past threaten his life as the possibilities for his parents' relationship diminish with Marty's picture fading at a slow but steady pace, suggesting that neither he nor his brothers will ever be born in the future which, according to Susan Jeffords, appears as an extreme anti-abortion message, the implications being that had your mother believed in abortion, you couldn't return to the past to rescue her (*Hard* 67). Marty, however, ends up profiting from change by getting the perfect, wealthy family of his dreams. Curiously enough, no questions about Marty's real family whereabouts are pronounced: the family he used to have was, in traditional terms, shameful, dysfunctional, and, in general, "worse" than the new one—so, again, in traditional terms, nobody would blame Marty for wanting to replace it for a new better one. The fact that no inquiry is ever made in the film about the whereabouts of Marty's "true family" suggest that such change is just as natural and desirable as replacing an old and rusty electrical appliance.

This way, both Marty's and Reagan's aim here was that of helping George and America, respectively, undergo a process of remasculinization that would restore the old social order that used to reign in America during the 1950s. As we will study in the following lines, stable gender relations appear as crucial to having a successful life and a sound family. The first step towards such retrieval of the traditional masculine values came in extolling the virtues of masculinity in film. In the Hollywood system, during the 1980s, it was transcribed through spectacle and bodies, with the male body itself being the star in this kind of film. Thus, throughout this period, the male body became a site of audience attention, desire, and politics with stars such as Sylvester Stallone in the *Rambo* saga, Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*, or Clint Eastwood

in *Dirty Harry*. Thus, these films appear as a fragment of a wider cultural endeavor aiming at countering the perceived deterioration in masculine authority and power (as seen in the character of George McFly) by means of restoring cinema as a strong ideological apparatus that insisted on the importance of male sufficiency (Jeffords, "Masculinity" 246). On this account, the "hard bodies" (term coined by Susan Jeffords) are overinvested with a sense of omnipotence and of control of the whole narrative that stands for a greater collective symbol: the depiction of the never-tiring, muscular, unbending masculine body became an emblem for Reagan's presidency. Thus, in Reagan's self-promoted image, his was one of these hard bodies—chopping wood at his ranch and riding horses. As such, these hard bodies are not just the epitome of the national character—heroic, vigorous, and self-assured—but of the ubiquitous power of the patriarchy that Reagan was attempting to revive in the U.S (Jeffords, *Hard* 25).

This self-projected image elucidated in the American collective imaginary by Reagan's presidency came to be understood as an obvious condemnation and a stand against the Carter administration. That is, in contrast to the weakened—some even said "feminine" and "wimp"—country left by the liberal government in which the mighty United States was brought to a dead stop by a Third World country such as Vietnam, we are to find a renewed and reinvigorated nation that would restore America as the proud and powerful country it used to be. This revitalized U.S. would have the will and the strength to fight any "evil empire" that threatens the world order rather than submitting to them. As Roger Rosenblatt's assessment of Reagan's popularity suggests, part of the problem with the Carter administration was that he made them feel small as a nation, so instead of "hard bodies," Jimmy Carter's era was one of "soft bodies":

> There was Carter himself [...] who was perhaps most bitterly represented for shrinking those hopes down to the size of a presidency characterized by small people, small talk, and small matters. He made Americans feel two things they are not used to feeling, and will not abide. He made them feel puny and he made them feel insecure. (Jeffords, *Hard* 25)

This way, the differences between the George McFly at the beginning of the film and at the ending stand for the desirable change that America is to undergo during the Reagan era. Carter's lack of strength and resolve had transformed America into an exhausted and emasculated nation that lost its will and strength to the power of communism. Parallel to this is George's attitude towards his wife and towards Biff (who could be understood as the "evil empire" that needs to be fought): he is indecisive, paralyzed, frail, and trembling in fear when he is to face adversity. That is, in terms of traditional masculinity, George McFly, as the epitome of the father figure of the era is "something less than a man," he does not fit in Lorraine's definition of what a "man" is supposed to be. Subsequently, in terms of cinema narrative, he, as the male member of the relationship, is unable to move towards the resolution of the crisis; whereas in mainstream cinema the female is the passive object, in *Back to the Future*, it is Lorraine who, as an active subject, decides to marry him out of

pity: "He seemed so helpless. Like a little lost puppy, and my heart just went out to him" (Zemeckis 00:16). Thus, "he" does not marry "her"; "she" marries "him," this is why, in this case, we can talk about masculinity in crisis.

This not only links with issues of masculinity in crisis but also with the general negative perception of feminism during the 1980s in the U.S.; for Robert Bly, "The United States has undergone an unmistakable decline since 1950," one that he attributes to the extending power of women in society and the corresponding "diminishment and belittlement of the father" (35). Therefore, in exactly the same fashion that Reaganism managed to discredit liberal politics, it demonized women's liberation and feminism, as a contemporary American scourge "as the source of an endless laundry list of personal, social, and economic problems" (Faludi xviii). This way, and in this state of affairs, it was claimed that the image of a patriarchal, authoritative, and tough father was damaged by Jimmy Carter, who would turn to his wife, First Lady Rosalyn Carter, for advice when making any important decision (Jeffords, *Hard* 10). In *Back to the Future*, the mother figure is blatantly under siege: the Lorraine of the present is a hypocrite who presents herself virtually as a puritan when talking about "girls chasing boys" or "sitting in a parked car with a boy" (Zemeckis 00:15). However, the image the audience receives from her when she was a teenager is one completely different from the one she keeps trying to project before her children: she drinks, she smokes, and she "chases boys" and "parks the car with them."

It is in this context of lack of gender harmony within the family system that Marty, as carrier of the Reagan revolution, is revealed as the one who would put things back in place and restore patriarchy as the most desirable system to live in. However, things are not so easy for George McFly, he must overcome one final test before his transformation into a "proper man" is fully accomplished: he is to confront Biff, his antagonist, and win. At the center of the film, there actually lies a plot of social Darwinism, a both human and urban "survival of the fittest" over the position of the dominant male. Thus, in the altered version of the past George is the one to come to Lorraine's rescue, and not the other way around; George, the man in the family, is now in control of the situation. Marty, then, turns his Carter father into a Reagan father, one that anyone would approve of, and one who can actually be a model to follow for his children. Only by recovering his personal and domestic manliness is George McFly able to become a "real man" not only in economic terms, —as provider of the family—but also in sexual terms, since the only assertions of George's sexuality are seen after his evolution (i.e. he pinches Lorraine's bottom).

After such change Marty wakes up to a "new morn in America" and the first words he utters are "what a nightmare" (Zemeckis 01:43); as if the whole Carter era was just a "bad dream" you can wake up from. As he makes his way to the kitchen, he is shocked to see his newfound family: the mise-en-scène speaks for itself with a perfectly lit and well-furnished house; his brother is dressed in a suit ready for a working day at office (instead of at a fast food restaurant); his sister is not even able to keep up with the many suitors she has now; he himself gets the 4×4 of his dreams; his mother looks healthier; and his father is now Biff's superior, a successful writer, a caring husband, and a sober father—he does not even wheeze anymore. He

tells his son "like I've always told you: put your mind to it, and you can accomplish anything" (Zemeckis 01:46); in short, the idea is that one can even change history.

Only one important question remains: so far we have not even mentioned "Doc" Brown, for despite the fact that he was not the one who changed reality, none of this could have ever happened without him. So, who is him if not Ronald Reagan himself? He used technology in the name of science; survived an assassination attempt by Libyan terrorists, one of Reagan's main targets; acted like a symbolic father; enabled a low class family to go up in the social ladder by recovering their lost values; found his place in the Wild West (*Back to the Future Part III*); provided moral guidance for American young people; and, eventually, "both, by the end of the decade, seem to have gone beyond time itself, to have left the limitations of history and entered into the realm of fantasy, glory, and dreams" (Jeffords, *Hard* 78).

All in all, *Back to the Future* provides us with quite an androcentric view on the crisis of American national identity and politics during the Reagan era. Interestingly enough, all the problems the McFly family has are solved once the father figure gets his patriarchal authority back. There was nothing any of the other members of the family could do to deal with their problems, the whole of the responsibility for either success or failure relies on the father figure. Thus, *Back to the Future* falls on what feminist theory has been identified as the subsumptive universalism ascribed to traditional thought; that is, the development of a sense of illusory equality that would include all those social groups that have traditionally been excluded from History by the WASP man. In other words, it refers to the tendency to believe and accept that accomplishments achieved by the male part of society stands for the whole of it. Following this line of thought, what is good for men is good for the family; and what is good for the family, is seen as good for the entire society. Thus, Ronald Reagan's revolution aimed at bringing back to life the nation's former glory with a well organized family—father-headed—as cell units of a larger system.

WORKS CITED

Back to the Future. Dir. By Robert Zemeckis. Universal, 1985.

Bly, Robert. *Iron John: A Book about Men*. Cambridge: Da Capo, 2004.

Depoe, Stephen. *Arthus Schlesinger, Jr., and the Ideological History of American Liberalism*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1994.

Faludi Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. New York: Crown, 1991.

Garry, Patrick. *Liberalism and the American Identity*. Kent: Kent State UP, 1992.

Hamby, Alonzo. *Liberalism and Its Challengers: From F.D.R. to Bush*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.

Jeffords, Susan. "Can Masculinity Be Terminated?" *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. Ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. New York: Routledge, 1993. 245-262.

—— *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1994.

Kemp, Tom. *The Climax of Capitalism: The U.S. Economy in the Twentieth Century.* London: Longman, 1990.

Nadel, Alan. *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan's America.* New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997.

Mervin, David. *Ronald Reagan and the American Presidency.* London: Longman, 1990.

Miller, Mark. *Boxed In: The Culture of TV.* Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988.

Sonderegger, John. "Ronald Reagan's America." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (January 13, 1989).

Steinberg, Stephen. *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America.* New York: Atheneum, 1981.

Troy, Gil. *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005.

Wills, Garry. *Reagan's America.* New York: Penguin, 1988.

PEER REVIEWERS FOR *RCEI*: NOVEMBER 2013