Deconstructing Reaganism

Deconstructing Reaganism:
An Analysis of American Fantasy Films

By

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INTRODUCTION

Even more than 30 years since Ronald Reagan delivered his 1980 "New Beginning" speech,[1] when he accepted the Republican party's presidential nomination, the near-mythic devotion to this man remains. In 2008, nearly every presidential candidate from Reagan's political party invoked his legacy as well as his claim as heir apparent to that legacy. Among the more recent Tea Party Movement[2] activists, deeply concerned that Reagan's conservative legacy could be washed away during the Obama presidency, T-shirts and bumper stickers carry slogans underscoring the near-deification of the man: "What Would Reagan Do?"

An enormously popular political figure in life and after his death in 2004, Reagan used his 1980 acceptance speech to outline several themes, particularly the failure of Jimmy Carter and the government to protect American citizens from the effects of an "indigestible economic stew" that "has turned the national stomach" (Reagan, 1980, online). In the middle of the speech, Reagan leveled his strongest indictment against the government and what he saw as its assault on free enterprise:

> The head of a government, which has utterly refused to live within its means and which has, in the last few days, told us that this year's deficit will be $60 billion, dare to point the finger of blame at business and labor, both of which have been engaged in a losing struggle just trying to stay even. High taxes, we are told, are somehow good for us, as if, when government spends our money it isn't inflationary, but when we spend it, it is.

In 2010, the arguments about government's role and functions in one of the deepest economic recessions, along with the longest wars of engagement in U.S. history (Iraq and Afghanistan) had already changed. The selective historical memory of many political leaders has also fueled the conservative embrace of Reaganism to endorse the status quo of traditional family values as they are ensconced in a Judeo-Christian framework.

However, for every acolyte or Reagan loyalist who has taken the man for granted in portraying the president in as positive light as possible, there

are those who, for the past three decades, have demonised and vilified the man as the chief representative of all the social, political, and cultural ills that plague contemporary society. Yet, both adherents and critics share a misunderstanding that not only points to how Reagan's reality has been conveniently simplified to exalt the man in the broadest of hero worship, but also to comprehending why the United States of American remains so profoundly shaped by his historical presence.

This is where American fantasy films—especially when they are taken from a particular era—can provide a broadly accessible platform for trying to make sense of just how these tropes shape and function in the exercise of historical memory. These films lend themselves well to the analysis because they work "as ways of representing aspects of the world—the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the 'mental world' of thoughts, feelings, beliefs…and the social world" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 124). As examples of contemporary fantastic narrative, they form part of a "decentered discourse of subject" (Bessière, 1974, p. 73) and reflect Foucault's (1969, p. xviii) notion of "heterotopia," in which "different spaces can come in contact with other spaces that seem to bear no relation to them." As a result, the characters in these films begin to wonder "which world they are in," the "real" or an "imaginary," fantastic world (Danahar, Schirato and Webb, 2000, p. 13). And, just as the myth of the Reagan legacy has taken form in the electoral and governing discourse of the nation, the real and imaginary in these films can become equally blurred.

In fact, fantasy is "anti-rational" in the way it often attacks, challenges, and contradicts contemporary constructs of reason. Fantasy creates an illusion of reality—an illusion that is readily apparent in the medium of films—and particularly evident in fantasy films. There is always a distinct tension between the "real" and the "unreal," and this tension—much as that experienced by participants and spectators in the ongoing political discourse of American politics—is felt and experienced both by the characters in these film and we the viewers. This leads us, as critical viewers, to largely unacknowledged subtexts that are deeply embedded in all six films and begin to reveal the irreconcilable contradictions, incoherencies, and paradoxes rooted in their capitalistic and Reaganesque portrayals, and that is the ultimate purpose and goal of this book.

In this context, the key research questions are: 1) Which elements of Fairclough's framework for critical discourse analysis can be applied to explore the discursive structures within these American fantasy films? 2) In how far do the films follow Reaganesque concepts of a "new" American society? 3) In how far do notions of the "fantastic" and postmodern concepts break with common patterns of Reaganism reflected in these films? The six films selected for analysis—*Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, 1985), *Pleasantville* (Ross, 1998), *Peggy Sue Got Married* (Coppola, 1986), *Big* (Marshall, P., 1998), *The Family Man* (Ratner, 2000), and *The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998)—share several characteristics particularly suited to studying cinema against a landscape of Reaganism, and they allow us to both look back to understand the past, as well as forward to understand the current American political climate. In various ways, each film represents the comprehensive continuum of tension and conflict involved in the redemption of the weak father figure, echoing the sociopolitical and socioeconomic tones of the Reagan administration's campaign of restoring and repositioning America's heroic, strong role in the economy and arena of international relations as the unquestioned leader at home and abroad.

More significantly, these films—not only in content but also in their titles—represent the most popular tropes, especially those often enthusiastically embraced by the controversial president in his formal speeches, as well as those that eventually came to be regarded as the most pejorative representations of the Reagan administration. However, the films—when viewed as a total package—demonstrate quite compellingly, as with those trying to protect and enhance the Reagan legacy, that in celebrating nostalgically the blissful pleasantries of family stability and social order, an unsettling and unsatisfying mythology has instead been created about a period in which many Americans were acutely aware that something was missing, even if they could not pinpoint it at the time.

To help track how dynamic tropes, both positive and negative, emerged to shape and challenge the legacy-building ritual that started during the 1980s and continues to this day, three of the films chosen were made during the climatic years of the Reagan presidency, and the other three were made within 12 years after Reagan's retirement in 1989. Jim Collins (1993, p. 255) claims that films such as *Back to the Future*, *Pleasantville,* and others belong to a genre he calls "new sincerity" because of the way in which they reconfigure cultural references. Indeed, the journeys undertaken by the protagonists in these fantasy films tend to reflect a simple binary formulation that was reinvigorated during the

Reagan era, sustained through the 1990s, and vigorously challenged in the 2000s: One is the positive American-centric portfolio of technological prowess, economic prosperity, and moral-social integrity, while the other is the fragmented, weak, disorganised structure, depleted of its benevolent, virile, patriarchal figures. In this context, this book explores the "semantic engineering," as Fairclough (1995a) would suggest, which is essential to promoting the aspects of capitalism and community order desired by those with hegemonic power.

This "official" discourse also includes racial perspectives, which gain unprecedented currency within the context of Obama's presidency, and have simultaneously invigorated the efforts of the most aggressive promoters and sharpest critics of the Reagan legacy enterprise. However, in this book I argue further that while the protagonists, as part of their journeys, tidy up the messiness of the past and try to preserve the fantastical myth of stability and social order, we must acknowledge that, like the protagonists in these films, they (just like us, the viewers) can never completely shake free of the uncontrollable, divergent events that inevitably unmask the flimsiness of this imaginary, capitalist structure.

There is clear evidence the critical potential of the filmic subtexts is largely based on the characteristics of the "fantastic" elements that break with the capitalist perspectives portrayed, and helps to reveal such "hidden" aspects of ideology "that underpin social interaction" (Bloor and Bloor, 2007, p. 27). These subtexts open up the narrative framework of choices, giving the protagonists ways of re-imagining or re-inventing their roles, leveraging ideological possibilities, and finding diverse, compelling ways to make the precepts and notions of Reaganism and contemporary corporate and social norms accessible and flexible according to their own life stories and desires. The fantastic heroics of these protagonists, therefore, can be contemplated and envisioned in their own individual renditions.

To set the stage for the individual film analyses, chapters one and two comprise a review of some key concepts of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and the fantasy genre, which will help to further explore cinematic reflections of Reaganism. Chapter one explores ideology as an important aspect of CDA because it is directly related to power relations. I draw on Ruth Wodak (2001a) who believes that it is dominance that structures discourse, and how attempts to resist the effects of power and ideology result in breaking conventional, discursive practices. I examine Norman

Fairclough (1989-2003) and Gunther Kress (1990) in terms of how these acts of resistance against dominant ideologies are acts of "creativity," as exemplified even in popularised, mainstream films. Films are also discussed as multi-semiotic artifacts that reflect sociocultural processes, relations, and change, as well as social spaces with two simultaneously occurring social processes: "cognition and representation of the world, and social interaction" (Fairclough, 1995a, p. 41).

In this context, this book also addresses the potential shortcomings of any film analysis: the tendency to be reductive to the extent that a single or small cluster of implied themes becomes the de facto universal structure upon which all potential film narratives are distilled. Indeed, we must be alert to the political and historical contradictions that necessitate additional and previously hidden interpretations that are enriched in cultural, socioeconomic, and ethnic themes. Therefore, it becomes instructive to dissect a film not merely from a hermeneutics emphasis, but also from a problem-solving perspective that delves directly into historical questions of capitalism, nationalism, race, ethnicity, and masculinity as it relates to fatherhood and family leadership, and how these questions (and ongoing discussions related to them) overlap and affect each other.

Chapter two explores the genre of the fantastic and the fantasy film, relying primarily on Tzvetan Todorov's (1975) definition of the fantastic because it most accurately describes the "hesitation" and "disbelief" that is so clearly exhibited by the main characters in the films chosen and shared with the viewer. In addition, I draw on Rosemary Jackson (1981), Tom and Meriel Bloor (2007), and Mikhail Bakhtin (1973) to investigate the ideological implications of the fantastic more in depth.

The six case studies of the films are then presented in separate chapters in which each film is examined as an example of a Hollywood fantasy blockbuster about individual choice facilitated, and at the same time, constrained by the collective structures of contemporary U.S. capitalism. In this context, it becomes possible to investigate further the idealised presentations in the films, some of which have been produced with a considerable amount of slyness and subtlety, while others indicate alternatives but fail to elaborate them, i.e. the development of subtexts varies from film to film quite considerably. For example, *Back to the Future*, released in 1985, emerges prominently in Reagan's 1986 State of the Union Address, just days after the tragic Challenger space shuttle accident. Directly addressing the "younger generation," the president said:

"With all the temptations young people face, it sometimes seems the allure of the permissive society requires superhuman feats of self control" (Reagan, 1986a, online). He continued: "As they said in the film, *Back to the Future*, 'Where we are going, we don't need roads.'"

It is important to acknowledge the sustaining power of the subtexts generated by those managing to weave a hypnotic false history that idolised the imaginary political figure who still compels so many to ignore other considerations in society. What made the Reagan mythology possible at all is that he backtracked on almost every major political promise because doing otherwise would have exposed completely the shortcomings of his original intentions.

Even more than *Back to the Future*, *Pleasantville*, released in 1998—a time when the Reagan legacy was being further cemented with a flood of books that warmly remembered his presidency—appears to reconstruct the American Dream via its nostalgic look backwards. However, like Grace Metalious's (1956, 2002) novel *Peyton Place*, that set off a firestorm in the 1950s, *Pleasantville* sheds light on the same iconic social constructs that the book sets out to reveal, as well as the ways communities resisted these revelations. Despite desperate attempts to leave intact what was imagined "innocent" and "pleasant," the marginalised elements bubble uncomfortably close to the surface. In particular, *Pleasantville*, where colour is a prominent part of the *mise-en-scène*, allows the comparison of the blandness of suburban life with "otherness," because beneath the façade of imagined normalcy, the pretense of denial and detachment feeds an evil that eventually unleashes chaos with tragic consequences or, to varying degrees of extent, personal development and dissatisfaction at home, school, the workplace, and social venues.

In *Peggy Sue Got Married*, released in 1986, the distinct "pro-family" trope reasserting marriage as a worthy institution gets a neat cinematic treatment. The film, made during Reagan's second term, reflects the president's championing of "new patriotism," as well as the reactionary backlash against women's rights causes and the appropriation of sexual expression only within the contexts of marriage and procreation. However, the protagonist's marriage still ends up less than perfect, and the fact that independent relationship alternatives are available suggest that even a conservative's approach to social issues might be far more nuanced than what the mythologised Reagan storyline suggests.

Very similarly, *Big*, released in 1988 during the final months of Reagan's presidency, draws first and predominately on the conservative social rhetoric that a woman's place is in the home where she can fulfill her "natural" role as homemaker and caregiver, as frequently highlighted in the official discourse of Reagan's presidency. In *Big*, there is a subtle sleight-of-hand diluting the pro-Reagan *Back to the Future* trope with a satirical take on the yuppie ethos of take-no-prisoners greed and the obsession with work and Machiavellian office politics in order to advance on the corporate ladder, even at the expense of family cohesion.

While *Pleasantville*, employing the metaphors of colour, echoes the critique of Reagan as aggravating the nation's racial divide in economic and social policy, *The Family Man*, a film released in 2000—12 years after the end of Reagan's two terms in office—reinforces the fantasy of the white man's redemption being sustained through an imagined ritual atonement in the figure of a black angel. And like *Peggy Sue Got Married*, it reinforces the importance of choosing marriage and family over work and economic greed. However, as the story originates in 1987 and moves 13 years ahead, *The Family Man* also offers us the nuances of independent options that suggest the social quest for happiness can be conducted at a distance from economic considerations.

Finally, *The Truman Show*, released in 1998, completes the treatment of Reagan, a former Hollywood actor, as a presidential movie star. More than ten years before the film was released, political critics frequently called Reagan's presidency "The Truman Show," particularly because the Republican president consistently misappropriated the legacies of Harry Truman and other Democratic presidents from earlier periods. Following the other five films analysed, *The Truman Show* brings full circle the implications of the blur between reality and the imagined world, constructed specifically for the protagonist hero. Unaware of the massive media monster that is constructed around him, in which everyone else is an actor, Truman (Jim Carrey) is spontaneous, charming, and funny—just as Reagan appeared regularly in his public appearances and press briefings.

In aggregate, the films studied in this book illuminate that improving as a national community requires us to acknowledge it as an important initial step, but we also need to proceed fully aware of historical considerations that are unencumbered by the politically manipulated and engineered motivations of those who prefer to ignore the failed intentions

of their imaginary heroes. With Reagan, the nation settled comfortably into the habit of hearing feel-good speeches, which cast leaders as likeable, homespun Americans, and which avoided confronting directly the nation's most serious and pervasive problems. The acolytes of Reaganism, for good and bad, have consolidated a civic tradition where anything above and beyond the national status quo becomes an unrealistic expectation that could never possibly happen.

Will Bunch (2010, online), for example, hones in on contemporary conservatives who have erroneously hijacked the Reagan legacy—for their own political gain—taking undue advantage of an ubiquitous digital media environment that was not present during Reagan's administration. According to Bunch:

> The power of liberalism was still strong in the land, and so Reagan, like Nixon before him, operated in an environment of relative rationality and sanity that we can scarcely even imagine today. It was no golden age by any means, but at least there was some sense of brass tacks. Rightwing think tanks were growing rapidly, but not yet totally dominant, Rush Limbaugh's name was utterly unknown. Fox News would not be launched for a decade. It was a different world. And that's the world in which John McCain first won his seat in the Senate, when Barry Goldwater retired.

Bunch acknowledges that Reagan would be positioned well to the left of today's Republican party on such issues as whether or not torture was permissible. Similarly, he highlights the high risks involved in the selective editing of the Reagan legacy. Bunch states:

> It's almost tragic—when you go back to the very recent history of the 1980s—when you realize how seriously an American consensus on human rights and the power of our criminal justice system has been trashed by the modern conservative movement. It's going to take a long time to get that back—although the words that Reagan and his aides left behind could help America get past this.

The question is, then, if we can change the metric, take the risks, and transform the calculus of our discourse where we judge ourselves and our leaders on raising the individual and collective bars of our civic enlightenment, and designating anything less as a major disappointment.

CHAPTER ONE

APPLYING CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA) TO AMERICAN FANTASY FILMS

1.1 DEFINING DISCOURSE

Discourse can be viewed as a form of power-supportive "knowledge," as posited by Siegfried Jäger (2001, pp. 32-34), who relies heavily on Foucault's theory of discourse in his discussion of "what knowledge… consists of, how this valid knowledge evolves," and "how it is passed on." For Jäger, knowledge, in how it directs and impacts society, encompasses human consciousness, which is what people use to make sense of the world. Individuals acquire knowledge discursively over the span of their lifetime, and CDA attempts to identify and critique knowledge in an effort to understand its context and its relationship to power. Jäger claims that knowledge "flows" throughout society and time, becoming "mutual knowledge" that is used in communicative acts. Shared knowledge is an important aspect of discourse because individuals need it to effectively communicate with one another. If someone assumes that an individual knows something when in fact he or she does not, a breakdown in communication can occur. In the film *Big*, for example, communication is often hampered because Josh (Tom Hanks)—due to the fantastic situation in which he finds himself—does not or cannot share mutual knowledge with the other characters in the film. Thus, when he tells Susan (Elizabeth Perkins), "I miss my family…and I want to go home," she mistakenly thinks that Josh is married.

This book will view discourse as "language in action" (Hanks, 1996), and language as "meaningful symbolic behavior" (Blommaert, 2005, p. 2). In other words, language and discourse, as a human activity, is directly connected to social, cultural, and historical factors. More specifically, this book addresses discourse from a cultural/socio-political rather than from a linguistic perspective; a hybrid drawing upon key concepts linked to Foucault and Fairclough. Consider Foucault (1969), who saw the verbal

"statement" as the basic unit of discourse, and discourse as being shaped, confined, and acted upon by social institutions, such as prisons, schools, political groups, the professions, and other community institutions.

I concur with Foucault's notion that it is statements that make all utterances, speech acts, and propositions socially meaningful. But these statements are only made meaningful by a network of social rules. That is, they depend on the conditions from which they emerge and exist within a discursive field. For example, the use of a politician's "short quote" or "sound bite" universally forms the basis for mass media punditry. In a tight orbit, the "sound bite" suddenly springs forward into an extensive string of speculative commentary as imagined by political analysts.

In his preface to *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault (1973, p. xvi) wrote:

> Commentary questions discourse as to what it says and intended to say; it tries to uncover that deeper meaning of speech that enables it to achieve an identity with itself, supposedly nearer to its essential truth; in other words, in stating what has been said, one has to re-state what has never been said.

The phenomenon of "never been said" has become particularly well suited to the mass media's need to produce, without interruption, content for the 24/7 news cycle. Despite the essential flaws of voicing speculation unfettered from any demand of contemplative reasoning or thought, the political commentary on air and so widely accessible online works quite well in the absence of any limits or common language with prescribed rules. Later, Foucault (ibid., p. xviii) offers a fresh option:

> Is it not possible to make a structural analysis of discourse that would evade the fate of commentary by supposing no remainder, nothing in excess of what has been said, but only the fact of its historical appearance?

The near-total obsession with "sound bites" is less suggestive about their significance than about the way journalists and the mass media have turned political campaigns into larger narratives where strategies, not issues of substance, and the dissection of strategy play well in crafting those narratives.[3]

As contemporary CDA has shown, language, discourse, and thus texts are multi-semiotic—they include all forms of communication: written, spoken, and visual. Focusing on lexical and grammatical features within texts, Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan (1985) suggest that they depict

and represent the social and natural world, construct and direct social relations, and develop commonly accepted conventions of identifiable appearance in particular media forms as coherent texts. And Gunther Kress (1993, p. 25) notes that written and spoken texts represent specific, selective views of the world and of "subject positions," and they lay out the social relations of "reading positions." These reading positions situate readers in their identifiable relations of power and agency relative to texts. Therefore, films—more specifically, American fantasy films—serve as multi-semiotic discourse texts that lend themselves well to Fairclough's approach to CDA.

Discourse is very much a social phenomenon: it defines us as human beings and forms the basis of societies. As Jan Blommaert (2005, p. 4) rightly points out: "there is no such thing as a 'non-social' use of discourse, just as there is no such thing as a 'non-cultural' or 'non-historical' use of it." And because discourse is a social phenomenon, it often becomes the site of conflict, struggle, and/or oppression, and it is essential in rendering every aspect of an individual's social, cultural, political, and educational environment meaningful. Therefore, films are very much social discourse texts: they are conceived of, produced, written, directed, and acted in by human beings with the purpose of telling a story to an audience. In addition, they often depict social conflicts, struggles, and different forms of oppression, and they are often used to convey or promote social messages, such as the oppressive nature of racism. It is in their role of conveying messages and being consumed by an audience that they become socially discursive texts as well.

Cliff Oswick and Tom Keenoy (2001, online) suggest that CDA leads to "a deeper and more socially contextualized analysis" of dialogue, following up on Fairclough's (1985, 1992a) methodological application of CDA to conceptualising discourse as "being simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice" (Oswick and Keenoy, 2001, online). The analysis of the films in this study, for example, proves particularly instructive in comprehending the Reagan hagiography, especially in recognising that the Reaganesque rhetorical talks about freedom had little, if anything, to do with any analytically rigorous conceptualisation of freedom.

Concerning the discourse found in film, Oswick and Keenoy cited several elemental layers used to construct film discourses, including the entertainment industry's "social practices" and most significantly, the

social contexts of a film's location, which serves as "an essential bedrock of imagery/reality in order to construct a convincing story/reality." Using Las Vegas in their specific analysis, Oswick and Keenoy states: "As a macro-spectacle, Las Vegas represents a singular display of the problems which arise in attempting to distinguish meaningfully between 'reality' and 'fiction.'" In their article, they "provide an example of a discursive method to explore the interplay between 'social relations' and 'images' as critical factors of the realities and fictions which constitute the 'Las Vegas Spectacle.'" They examine social relations "using the systematic application of critical discourse analysis and the specific images analyzed are Las Vegas films. An intrinsic feature of the various representations of Vegas is the notion of 'compulsive consumption.'" They also discuss the "implications of the 'Vegas phenomenon' (i.e., the centrality of spectacle, consumption, and the collapse of fiction and reality) for the study of organizations and processes of organizing." Likewise, each of the six films in this study contain numerous referential elements that constitute or suggest the same sort of stagecraft that branded the "Reagan Spectacle" for the nation's voters.

As discourse texts, films work on multiple levels: linguistically, they are both written (screenplay and script) and spoken (the dialogue) discourse. Oswick and Keenoy would add the visual aspects of the geographic setting of the film as a central element to how the filmic texts work (e.g. the portrayal of Las Vegas). Indeed, the notion of films as multi-modal texts is central to the soundness of CDA methodology. Foucault's "dossier,"[4] Julia Kristeva's (1980, p. 66) contention of text constructed as a "mosaic of questions," Roland Barthes' (1973, p. 36) characterisation of the "infinite text," and Brian McHale's (1987) "Chinese box worlds"[5] underscore the concept of intertextuality, which begins to hint at the character of postmodern texts for their irony, paradoxes, and parodies. Therefore, "historiographic metafiction" is the crucible for distilling the strands of the intertextual politics of postmodern fictions.[6] Filmmakers can often justifiably take dramatic liberties in their narratives, especially if the arrogance, greed, and obsession with corporate capitalism or national exceptionalism is portrayed as essentially convincing in representing deeper truth-building awareness of the larger community.

Going further, the element of "voice" in analysing discourse signifies, in part, the effects of power positions among individuals and societies.[7] In the process, the local voice is transformed, but not to the extent that it

ceases to be recognisable as local. The term "glocalisation"[8] has been used to capture this process of merging. However, this construction of glocalisation fails to recognise that this kind of glocalisation is the deliberate, strategic embedding of certain local discourses into Western/capitalist models, and that corporations (e.g. mass media multiplatform conglomerates) involved effect the transformation. Taken to a local level, a desire for similar coherence in discursive meaning necessitates the assumption that people employ models encompassing shared beliefs implicit in discourse. Arguably, one would seek to persuade others communicating beliefs implicitly without actually asserting them, and with the diminished prospects that they will be challenged.

Therefore, voice is a central concern in CDA, and films provide a highly accessible context for analysing different voices and ultimately the mental representations associated with them: the dialogue spoken by the actors, the covert or overt sociopolitical message being conveyed by the writer/s and director, and so on. There is a bittersweet contrast, for example, between the anxieties about control over the local and the ambivalence of the global emergence (i.e. the infusion of colour) in *Pleasantville*. In *The Truman Show*, the narrative stokes disturbing suspicions that the comfortable familiarity about the local is no more than a mirage. However, what still needs to be parsed and studied further is to what extent these bittersweet feelings, tentative hopes, and disturbing suspicions from these films influence and shape popular responses and concerns about the risks of an increasingly interconnected, interdependent world that simultaneously and paradoxically conceals and reveals real imbalances of political and economic power.

As for audiences, structural anthropologists such as Edmund Leach (1954) and Claude Levi-Strauss (1978a, 1978b) have argued that it was not so much the immediate surface part of a story—kinds of characters, locations, etc.—that really comprised the act of communication in storytelling. Rather, it was the deeper, implicit structure that carried core ideas about agency, roles and social organisation, and so constituted the key part of the message. These writers saw this as the role of storytelling. Multinational corporate media may tell stories set in different settings and dealing with people that have slightly different values and looks, but the fundamental structural reasons for how they behave, for what they want and how they might attain it, will follow the same logic.

Bloor and Bloor (2007, p. 18), on the other hand, categorise mutual knowledge,[9] claiming that each of these categories contributes to the formation of identity, power, and ideology; therefore, they must be kept in mind when conducting CDA. We must remember that shared/mutual knowledge is woven into the fabric of cultural practice, so the critical discourse analyst should be prepared to investigate this knowledge and the assumptions that result in discursive constructs that, at various times, take on individually or collectively social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions. With Reagan, his most ardent supporters have aggressively policed how their political hero should be eulogised and remembered, ensuring that politically correct descriptions were neither patronising nor unpatriotic (e.g. either focusing on his sense of humour or genteel demeanor, or on criticising him for alienating large segments of the American population).

I contend that films can also serve as embodiments of socially shared knowledge, and most practitioners of CDA believe that discourse is the site of ideology, but they cannot agree on a consensus definition for operational purposes in research. With regard to Reaganism, while the most intensely felt criticisms and accusations leveled against the president during his time in office have subsided in terms of their political fury and indignation, there remains good opportunities to debate his legacy, especially as the current generation seeks to confront the issues that his philosophy have been indirectly, at the very least, responsible for keeping in play. An ideological example that is much discussed in CDA, and is a major focus of this book, is capitalism because of its widespread influence on Western society. Indeed, capitalistic ideology is a powerful discursive force that shapes many discourse texts, including the films I have chosen—particularly *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *The Truman Show*, *The Family Man*, and even, to some extent, *Big*.

Ideology is an important aspect of CDA because it is directly related to power relationships. Wodak (2001a, p. 3), for example, sees discourse as being "structured by dominance." That is, historically, dominance has been ideologically legitimised by those groups with power.[10] Thus, CDA often tries to analyse unequal power struggles in society and how they can be challenged. The effects of power and ideology are often "taken as a given," and any attempt to resist is seen as "the breaking of conventions, of stable discursive practices" (ibid.). For Fairclough and Kress (1993, p. 4ff), these acts of resistance against dominant ideologies are acts of "creativity," an idea that becomes apparent, for example, when Truman

attempts to escape Seahaven, or when Josh has to navigate the adult world of work and romance.

For some, such as Blommaert (2005, pp. 150-158), ideology is

> a specific set of symbolic representations—discourse, terms, arguments, images, stereotypes—serving a specific purpose, and operated by specific groups or actors, recognisable precisely for their usage of such ideologies.

Others, such as Terry Eagleton (1991) and John Thompson (1984), view ideology in more general terms in that it reflects particular social and political systems, and it both affects and is perpetuated by everyone within a particular system. In short, ideologies take many discursive forms and orders: capitalism, communism, fascism, and liberalism, for example. They can also represent different political positions along a broad, diverse continuum from "conservative" to "revolutionary." No matter what form they take, I agree with Blommaert's (2005, p. 159) fundamental claim that ideologies "characterize actors who adhere to them." They are codified and supported by different "basic" texts and have clear, historical origins.

Conversely, ideology can also be seen as a cultural manifestation of different social and political systems. These are conceived of as grand narratives, a view often attributed to the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971). Here, Blommaert (2005, p. 159) sees ideology penetrating "the whole fabric of societies or communities," producing "nominalized, naturalized patterns of thought and behavior."[11] Ideology's distinguishing trait refers to the subject matter of the discourse (i.e. social, economic, power relations, political), but those can become blurred in creative artistic and aesthetic forms. For example, Soviet Realism—art that glorified the roles of the working poor—shows how aesthetic and artistic expression is nearly absorbed completely into an ideological framework. Likewise, action stories, such as the series of four *Rambo*[12] films, can be interpreted ideologically for how they represent aspects of Western liberal democracies fighting against Soviet-style imperialism.

I believe ideology operates as a system of thought with distinguishing content that is capable of explaining or accounting for as much of the larger world as it can. Furthermore, it permits the writer (and/or filmmaker) to quash those contradictions that arise in circumstances where the ideological system cannot explain them. Therefore, ideology is a useful complement to the large, systemic patterns of dominance and power. However, more significantly, we rely on the functions of ideology to deal

directly with the contradictions that pop up frequently and negotiate them in our world experiences. Specifically, we can examine films to see how ideology enables, for example, various characters to continue acting in a manner consistent with ideological foundations they have previously adopted, even as they immediately face incontrovertible contradictions to those fundamentals.

It is quite evident that movies act as symbolic representations of discourses because they construct meaning, which is conveyed symbolically through the actor's words and actions.[13] Just as Eagleton believes that "there are specific historical reasons why people come to feel, reason, desire and imagine as they do" (Eagleton, 1994 in Wodak, 2001a, p. 10), we can view films such as *Back to the Future*, *Pleasantville*, and *Peggy Sue Got Married* from a historical perspective in that they reflect, in various forms, American ideals that are particularly relevant to the 1950s and early 1960s. And as we will see in the chapters that follow, their message is often implied or presupposed.

Pleasantville, for example, seems to reflect the simple virtues of family life in the 1950s, yet we can justifiably discern underlying ideological struggles encompassing race, sexual equality, censure, and the American ideal of "the pursuit of happiness" and "liberty and justice for all." Even more modern films, such as *Big* and *The Family Man*, are potentially ideological in their message that greed and capitalism are bad if they occur at the expense of love and family. The six films chosen for analysis show how effectively ideology can be "packaged" in movies, and how it is important to be aware of the implicit (or presupposed) "messages" that so often lie just beneath the surface of the cinematic experience. *Back to the Future*, for example, conveys a pro-Reagan perspective that is not overtly apparent in the film, but very much there nonetheless.

1.2 DEFINING TEXT

When we talk about a "text," we are often referring to actual spoken, written, or visual data, whereas "discourse" can be seen as the process of communication involving the production, application, and understanding of texts. In order to fully understand a text, we must also understand its context, its background information, or the knowledge being shared in communicative acts. In short, a text can be viewed as a "product" of discourse—a type of "record" of a communicative event.[14] I believe that

films can be regarded as multi-modal texts because they rely on more than one mode of communication with their audiences. For example, the introduction of black music in *Pleasantville* marks a shift from conservative to more liberal thought and behaviour.

Crucial to analysing film texts is to understand the contexts in which they arise. For Blommaert (2005, pp. 39-40), this is because context "addresses the way in which linguistic forms—'text'—become part of, get integrated in, or become constitutive of larger activities in the social world." John Gumperz (1982, 1992), who produced the seminal concept of "contextualisation" to explain how people are able to "make sense," also recognised how contextualisation can cause problems in discursive interactions, especially in regards to power relationships, race, gender, or ethnicity. Communication breaks down when utterances in contexts are intentionally or unintentionally "misplaced," or when those with power distort contexts to manipulate others. As a result, we might only be able to understand something if we are able to make sense of the context in which it resides.

Films offer an infinite number of social contexts for communicative events, and while other text forms—such as novels and even poems—provide examples of social interactions, the American fantasy films selected for this study provide an interesting platform for analysis in the way that they work as "social institutions" that, according to Fairclough (1995a, p. 38), are "an apparatus of verbal interaction." Each of the American fantasy films I have selected represent what Fairclough terms a "speech community" that has its own particular repertoire of speech events that are dictated by the film's settings, the identities and relationships between the characters, as well as their goals, conflicts, and desires.

1.3 Relevant Concerns of CDA

Critical discourse analysis is an extremely flexible way of approaching and thinking about any kind of text (spoken, written, visual—and thus, films) that does not draw upon any one particular theory nor use or require quantitative research methods. In essence, CDA attempts to reveal the "hidden" motivations behind texts and the methods used to interpret them. It is also used to expand discursive horizons. CDA is able to accomplish this through a deconstructive reading and interpretation of a given text based on the assumption that every text inscribes itself within a given discourse. In short, there is no single definition that can be given to

CDA because it is an interdisciplinary approach to discourse analysis that takes many forms, such as discursive psychology, conversational analysis, and sociolinguistics.[15] In general, CDA can be defined as a "set of methods and theories for investigating language use and language in social contexts" (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001, p. i). Concerning Reagan, my analysis shows that both the man's fiercest defenders and resolute detractors are missing an essential point that the worthwhile truths of the Reagan era actually fall somewhere in between these extreme dichotomies.

At its core, CDA attempts to analyse and reveal both the overt and covert "structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (Wodak, 1995, p. 4). In other words, it looks at the effects power has on individuals, groups, and societies. Fairclough's landmark publication, *Language and Power* (1989), is considered by many to be the "start" of CDA, and proponents of CDA view language as a "social practice," believing that "discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned" (Blommaert, 2005, p. 25, with particular reference to Fairclough, N., Mulderigg, J. and Wodak, R., 1997). They support the view of Jürgen Habermas (1977, p. 259) that "language is also a medium of domination and social force" that "serves to legitimize relations of organized power."[16] For example, a well-to-do suburban homeowner in America will champion the rhetoric of freedom and universal property rights only until the day when a nearby landowner, coming from different circumstances and background, wants to build an apartment complex or any other structure on his own property, which threatens to disrupt the community status quo.

The social issues addressed by CDA range from the very big (macro issues) to the very small (micro issues), and because the methods used in CDA are many, we cannot conceive of a single, generally accepted analytical method in CDA, which has led to criticism. Not everyone agrees on the theoretical and methodological validity and effectiveness of critical discourse analysis. Most criticism is aimed at both interpretation and context, with many charging that CDA is biased. One of CDA's biggest critics is Henry Widdowson (1995), who "accused CDA of blurring important distinctions between concepts, disciplines, and methodologies" (Blommaert, 2005, p. 31). Widdowson claims that CDA contains too many "vague" concepts and methods, relying on whichever social theory is popular at the time. In addition, he accuses CDA of being biased while pretending to be an objective form of analysis. Widdowson believes that CDA does not sufficiently take into account the multiple ways in which a

text can be read, or the social context in which discursive texts are produced and consumed. More important is his view that CDA often forces ideological meanings onto texts to suit the needs of the analyst.

Widdowson is not alone. Similarly, Jef Verschueren (2001), for example, claims that CDA often states the obvious from the analyst's point of view, whose opinion is no different than the participants being studied. This sometimes results in one ideology being replaced by another, which then leads to the projection of particular images of society or social structures onto different discourses. In doing so, CDA becomes "symptomatic." That is, it tries to prove its point based on a set of notions preconceived by the analyst. Similarly, Emanuel Schegloff (1997) also accuses CDA practitioners of projecting their personal political biases and prejudices onto their data and analysing them accordingly. This results in "stable patterns of power relations" being sketched, "often based on little more than social and political common sense," which are then "projected onto (and into) discourse" (Blommaert, 2005, p. 32). Furthermore, Stef Slembrouck (2001) finds fault with the "explanatory level" found in CDA. He disagrees with Fairclough's belief[17] that CDA "moves from ideology-dominated interpretation to 'absolute' or 'pure' explanation by drawing on social theory" (Blommaert, 2005, p. 32). Slembrouck takes issue with Fairclough by stating adamantly that all discourse and social activity is affected by ideology, yet Fairclough conducts discourse analysis that often ignores ideology and relies more on social theory. For Slembrouck (2001, p. 42), CDA suffers from the same dangers of "social-theoretical reductionism" and "linguistic reductionism" that CDA claims to fight in the first place.

I agree there is danger in conducting CDA and imposing one's own truths and/or ideologies onto the discourse being analysed, thus closing the dialogic process. This can be extremely problematic when the participant is "pushed out" of the explanatory phase of the analysis, particularly since one of the ultimate goals of CDA is the empowerment of those being analysed. As Blommaert (2005, p. 33) rightly points out: "Less than careful CDA may thus result, not in an empowered subject speaking with a more audible voice, but in a stentorian analyst's voice." We can believe—and I suggest that Fairclough would concur—that the dangers posited by Schegloff, Verscheuren, and Widdowson can be avoided if CDA is presented in a well-formed argument, one that can remain authoritative over time and have concrete, focused applications, such as this analysis of American fantasy films.

I believe the advantages of CDA lie in the fact that we should envision CDA as a multidisciplinary approach to analysing discourse. In addition, CDA often provides a "voice" for groups suffering from social discrimination, and it tries to expose both overt and covert power relationships.[18] CDA also declares that all forms of discourse are historical, and therefore can only be understood contextually, while paying attention to extra-linguistic factors, such as culture, society, and ideology. Furthermore, CDA looks at the intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between discourse texts, as well as the relationships between language and society and how such analysis can mediate this relationship. In this study, I utilise the use of language in social action as it is represented in American fantasy films. In order to do this, I rely mainly on the cultural and socio-political aspects of Fairclough's approach to CDA to examine the filmic messages, as well as examine the social aspects of film-based discourse. But I also supplement Fairclough's approach with the theoretical concepts of Kress, Wodak, and van Dijk where appropriate.

1.4 Applying Fairclough's 3D Approach to Film Analysis

I believe that adopting those elements of Fairclough's brand of CDA that support a cultural/socio-political studies approach is the most appropriate method for analysing the fantasy films selected because he takes a multi-methodological, three-dimensional approach to CDA to examine the social aspects of discourse,[19] and to highlight the "socially and discursively embedded nature of any text" (Locke, 2004, p. 42). Considered to be one of the "founding fathers" of CDA, Fairclough is heavily influenced by Foucault,[20] particularly in how he defines discourse as "a practice not just representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (Fairclough, 1992a, p. 64). He is interested in how social change is reflected in discursive activities and discursive texts, focusing on themes such as "neo-liberalism," "globalisation," and "knowledge and economy." Fairclough (1995a, pp. 138-139) posits the "promotional" and "consumer" characteristics of contemporary culture, and how these "designations point to the cultural consequences of marketization and commodification."

A film like *The Truman Show*, for instance, can be viewed as both a form of discourse as social spaces for cognition and interaction as well as a vehicle for selling goods through its use of product placement. However, this does not mean that *The Truman Show* is a pro-capitalism text. In fact,

the chapters that follow will show how this film and others both promote and are critical of capitalism, particularly because most of them were made during the Reagan presidency.

A Fairclough-based textual analysis is also fruitful because these fantasy films further serve as "sensitive barometers of social processes, movement and diversity" (Fairclough, 1992b, p. 209). Therefore, they become "particularly good indicators of social change." In fact, films often mirror different discourses and discursive social trends. Furthermore, the characters in these films reflect Fairclough's (1989, p. 36) dialectic, finding themselves in "various positions" of both "face-to-face" and "hidden" power relations, and they are often being "pulled in different directions." *The Truman Show*, for example, reflects Foucault's "bottom-up model of power," which focuses on "the way power relations permeate all relations within a society" (Mills, 2003, p. 34). As Truman gradually transforms himself from being Christof's (Ed Harris) "passive dupe" into an "active agent" in his quest to escape Seahaven and ultimately confront his maker, he becomes someone who is "capable of acting creatively" in order to "restructure his social condition" (Fairclough, 1992a, pp. 90-91). In fact, all of the protagonists in these films, due to their fantastic predicaments, must act creatively in order to survive and restore normalcy to their lives.

The Truman Show also reflects the complacency of American society in, as Roger Ebert (1998, online) put it, the way "we accept almost everything in our lives without examining it very closely." Indeed, Truman's struggle against power reflects Fairclough's (1989, p. 36) "power behind discourse" and "how orders of discourse, as dimensions of the social orders of social institutions or societies, are themselves shaped and constituted by relations of power." The characters in these films, like people in societies, interact with one another and by doing so, a hierarchy is established because "more powerful participants may be able to treat [discourse] conventions in a more cavalier way, as well as to allow or disallow varying degrees of latitude to less powerful participants" (ibid., p. 39). These films also reflect different constructs of American culture, offering cultural representations that can thus be compared and evaluated.[21] Therefore, a socio-cultural analysis of these films allows for conclusions to be arrived at "about the relative (un)truthfulness of [these] representations."

Fairclough's overall objective in CDA is to give accounts of how social changes are reflected discursively, and to elucidate the relationships between changes in discourse and changes in other non-discursive elements of "moments" of social life. He achieves this by identifying and analysing the "linguistic, semiotic and 'interdiscursive' features of 'texts'…which are part of social change," while addressing both "abstract social structures and concrete social events as parts of social reality" (2005, online). This requires CDA to have a "dialectical view of the relationship between structure and agency, and of the relationship between discourse and other elements of 'moments' of social practices and social events." In other words, discourse both "internalises" and is "internalised by" other social elements. I find Fairclough's three-dimensional approach to CDA particularly useful for film analysis because it allows us to focus on the ways in which film texts are discursively positioned, how they are produced and disseminated, and how various socio-cultural practices and discursive conditions at both institutional and societal levels provide contextual relevance.[22]

Like Foucault, Kress also views language as a social practice—one that is used for representation and signification. These include visual images such as television and advertisements—and of course, film—as well as music and other non-verbal forms of communication, such as body language and gestures (also apparent in films). In addition, Kress (1993, p. 24), like Fairclough, is very much concerned with the role of genre in CDA, seeing it as "the conventionalized aspect of the interaction." I agree with Kress's belief that the social and cultural context of discourse texts provides a good place to start for meaningful analysis of all aspects of language use. As Terry Locke (2004, p. 21) puts it: "it is the stability and repeatability of a social situation that leads to stability and conventionality in textual forms." Clearly, films provide such a "stable" and very much "repeatable" means of analysing discourse in a variety of genres, which is particularly relevant to my analysis of American fantasy films. And as Hodge and Kress (1988, p. vii) point out, we live in a society where "meaning resides strongly" in visual images.

Along with serving as models of discourse, films function to frame our collective reality, particularly in generating a key, "feel-good" component that has become critical in a mass media environment where elected officials need both the support of their partisan colleagues, and the general public's support to push forward key policy moves. This was particularly true with Ronald Reagan, who, with years of Hollywood