

UNDER COVER

A Tale of Two Worlds

Foreign visitors often teach us more about ourselves than we learn about them. So it is with Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* We know that he is an Extra-Terrestrial and that he comes from "out there." If we can judge by the interior of his spaceship—and we get only one glimpse of it—he lives in a steamy environment rather like a primordial rain forest. We know he likes Reese's Pieces (to the company's great good fortune), that he doesn't care for potato salad, and that he has a fondness, and a low tolerance, for beer. *E.T.* is in our world, not his, and it is American life that he illumines, not his own. We never even learn his real name; he is content with the one we give him.

We do learn, however, that *E.T.* is a communal being. He cannot exist by himself; he lasts as long as he does only because he is able to establish a bond with Elliot, the child who seeks him out and befriends him. Community is a matter of affects, not interests or ideas: Elliot, we are assured, does not think *E.T.*'s thoughts, he feels *E.T.*'s feelings. But even the bond with Elliot is not enough. *E.T.* is homesick unto death; without his people and his place he will die—the loving ministrations of Elliot and his brother and sister notwithstanding. In fact, he does die, or appears

to, and is revived only by the approach of his people.

America, by contrast, is *heimlos*. *E.T.* is taken into a California suburb where all the houses are new, all built on bare and leveled land. The only ties with the past are ludicrous—Halloween costumes worn in the bright sunshine of an afternoon, as bizarre as bikinis at the North Pole. The suburban "community" is a world of isolated households connected by cars and roads. Even pizza must be brought by automobile, and the children do not know the way to the park, having always been driven there. The households themselves are falling apart: Elliot's parents have separated and are clearly en route to a divorce.

Children are suited to befriending *E.T.* because they sense or know that there is something *wrong* with all this. Children still live in the community; adults only sleep there, if they do even that. As Spielberg understands, children are like villagers put down in a strange place, attempting to defend their customs, values, and rituals in a sometimes hostile and always baffling environment. Spielberg's children have all the faults appropriate to their kind. Nevertheless, they understand something about honor and keeping one's word, the obligations due to one's friends and brothers, and the duties owed to a helpless stranger. In the children's view, families belong together and people belong in their homes. The children, in other words, are almost as alien as *E.T.*

Public authority makes its appearance in *E.T.* as a faceless bureaucratic juggernaut, spying on and invading the home. It soon becomes clear, however, that the government is neither impersonal nor malevolent. It is made up of people, some of whom care a good deal about *E.T.* and his friends and all of whom are doing their best to save them. Government is concerned, even warm, but it is helplessly maladroit. It puts all of modern medical technology to work to cure *E.T.* and it fails, as it was bound to do, because homesickness is beyond the reach of its instruments. All of the government's technology, in fact, makes matters worse. *E.T.* makes an elaborate machine out of simple things; modern scientists use elaborate machines that do not comprehend simple things. Indeed, the effort to cure *E.T.* is a kind of allegory for modern government and science alike: Both are intended to cure our ills, but both are blind to the homesickness that is killing us.

Modern political thought intended to set us free from nature; *E.T.* came here to study nature. When *E.T.*'s quivering fingers uproot a plant, he presumably knows that the plant will die. Human beings can move and build, but we have a fatal uprootedness of our own. The more the world changes, the more that we grow desperate and furious when we cannot. In *E.T.*, the children's outrage and sense of betrayal is touching when it is not amusing; they are, after all, only children. But adults are only armed children, and for that reason the message of *E.T.* is deadly serious.

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