In 1967, Alexander Mitscherlich predicted that Western society was moving quickly toward a "fatherless society," one where both real fathers and the structures that stand in the place of paternal authority—secular and religious institutions, canons, traditional moral and ethical codes, etc.—were disappearing or becoming ineffectual. In this paper, I'd like to explore the extent to which we have realized Mitscherlich's vision, and to look at what effect a "fatherless society" has on the construction of the self. Using a psychoanalytic model that plays between neo-Freudian and Jungian methodologies, I contend that the condition of fatherlessness necessary disrupts traditional models of Oedipal self-formation, resulting in a condition of what Freudians would pejoratively label arrested development, and what Jungians would pathologize as a state of eternal childhood. But rather than link this condition to a mental illness or problem, I will argue that what were identified by Jung and Marie-Louis von Franz as peculiarities of the archetypal puer aeternus, including self-experimentation, messianic idealism, the quest for limit experiences, a fascination with extreme sports, and a sense that one's identity is provisional and unfinished, have become the structuring principles of the self in contemporary culture. In what follows, I trace the historical and cultural conditions that have moved the puer aeternus from a denigrated pathology to a privileged model for constructing the self, and I take a look at contemporary media that serve as narrative support and critique of the puer aeternus in contemporary culture.

Let me begin with a story that may illustrate my point: On my way home from a conference recently, my short flight from Chicago to my home in central Illinois got cancelled. As I was...
considering my options about how I might get home and where my checked bags might end up, a fellow passenger managed, in a matter of minutes, to arrange for all of the central-Illinois-bound luggage to be off-loaded from the plane, to rent an SUV, and to collect five of us more bewildered types into a group to ride the two hours home together. As we got to know our “savior,” a charismatic, tattooed, thirty-something man with no shoes, we found that he wasn’t married, worked for a marketing company, and was an avid skydiver. He had served in the air force, which he described as the branch of the service most suited for “lazy guys like him,” and had taken a job that allowed him to live anywhere in the country, travel three weeks out of the month, and keep things interesting by periodically changing the account he was working on. In short, he was a prototypical puer aeternus—embodying most of the symptoms of a person identified with that archetype as Marie-Louise von Franz lays them out in her study, The Problem of the Puer Aeternus, first published in 1970, and reprinted under the title, Puer Aeternus, in 1981.

I note the title to the first edition because it indicates von Franz’s general attitude to the puer, that it is a problem, a neurosis that needs a cure. Undeniably, certain features of the puer archetype are pejorative almost by definition—laziness, for example, and the inability or unwillingness to make a commitment. Charisma is certainly suspect, if not entirely negative, as it is usually applied to unscrupulous leaders intent on duping their disciples. But as for the rest of it—the unwillingness to follow rules or accept the status quo when there might be something better out there, the loss of faith in institutions, the desire to live dangerously—those were the very things that got me home that day. This particular puer makes those symptoms work for him in such a way that he can manipulate the world much more effectively than those standing in line patiently at the customer service desk. Instead, our restless puer ignored the line, walked right up to the desk and asked how long it would take to get his bags off the plane, which led to the attendants polling the rest of us and making the happy decision to unload everyone’s luggage, and he did this without making anyone upset, his boyish charm undoubtedly carrying the day. He has found a job that makes his “laziness” look like low-key salesmanship and works with his resistance to commitment by giving the appearance of a new job with every change of account. Cell-phone in hand, he contacted his friends while braving Chicago rush hour traffic in an unfamiliar vehicle, changing lanes like a maniac and turning a two-and-a-half hour drive into an enjoyable hour and forty-five minutes. Indeed, as I placed my fate in the hands of this modern-day Peter Pan flying down the highway in a rented SUV, I felt confirmed in my thesis for this paper: It would seem that in contemporary culture, identification with the puer aeternus is not so much a pathology as it is an adaptation to a way of life that welcomes, indeed requires, the characteristics of eternal youth in order to meet the demands of technological innovation, a “fatherless society,” and the continual reinvention of the self in the absence of authoritative monomyths that structure our experience.

So how did we get to the point where the puer aeternus is so privileged, and how do we feel about it? A general consensus has emerged among culture-mulchers that a significant shift in sensibility over the past thirty years has disrupted traditional notions of what it means to achieve a mature sense of self. In the theoretical humanities (philosophy, literary criticism, comparative religion, and cultural studies) and the social sciences (sociology, psychology, psychoanalysis, and anthropology), academic and popular studies of the self share a sort of crisis mentality: The notion of a deep or authentic self as either a foundation or a goal to be achieved and lived has been replaced by more shifty configurations, such as Christopher Lasch’s “pathological narcissist,” Philip Cushman’s empty self, Robert Jay Lifton’s Protean self, Kenneth Gergen’s saturated self, Carlo Strenger’s designed self, Foucault’s self as a work of art, and Judith Butler’s performative subjectivity, among others. The proliferation of these designations results from an attempt to account for an observable difference in the way people approach their lives, and indicates that ideas about the nature of the self as somewhat essential, transcendent, and/or unrelated to history and culture have been misguided. Instead, as Strenger points out, “[p]sychic structure is in many ways a function of social structure” (43).

Each of the above mentioned theorists has attempted to contextualize what they have observed about the changing face of the self by exploring the material conditions through which the ideologies of a culture are purveyed. Lasch, for instance, provides a sociological overview of character types that have dominated American capitalist culture. The “autonomous” boot-strapping figure of the Protestant work ethic was a rugged individualist, opening frontiers and establishing American industry in the prewar period.
But as Slavoj Žižek points out, his “autonomy” really means that he is answering to a paternal ideal (102). The paternal ideal, grounded in the classic oedipal dilemma, causes him to break away from the constraints of home and group and set himself up as self-authorizing. This monomyth of radical individuation finds support in all sorts of cultural narratives, from Oedipus to the American Revolution to Huck Finn to Stuart Little (the book, not the film), but it truncates Joseph Campbell’s developmental schema of Departure, Initiation, and Return by a refusal to return. Hence one might say that this autonomous individual remains ungrounded, with strong shades of the *puer aeternus*, since he never claims his place in adult society, but seeks to stand out from it as unique. Charles Ingalls, as he is presented in the fictionalized memoirs of his daughter, Laura Ingalls Wilder, is exemplary of this character type; though the TV series based on *Little House on the Prairie* presents him as very connected to his family and the community in which he lived, the books show a man who is disconcerted by community and indebtedness to others, and who insists on moving whenever the rule of law seeks to encroach on his individual freedom.

A shift in sensibility came about with World War I. Because of this conflict, American and European men who operated as autonomous individuals under a paternal ideal had to readjust their sense of honor and masculinity in order to subordinate it to a national cause. Instead of looking out for themselves, they had to be able to place their trust in other men, and to be responsible for those men as well in combat. This shift toward group solidarity continued beyond the World Wars into a postwar economic boom which was marked, at least in America, by the rise of corporations rather than entrepreneurial efforts. Just as in war, individual effort and a desire to stand out were devalued in favor of anonymous and multilayered bureaucracy. As Žižek notes, “The source of moral satisfaction is no longer the feeling that we resisted the pressure of our milieu and remained true to ourselves (i.e., to our paternal ego-ideal), but rather the feeling of loyalty to the group” (102). While Žižek argues that both the “autonomous” individual and this new “organization man” are under the sway of the same paternal ego-ideal, I would point out that the idea of a group seems more resonant with maternal logic than with paternal assertion. Losing oneself in a corporation or some other larger structure is akin to a desire to slide back along the developmental path toward de-individuation or re-absorption into a devouring maternal. Interestingly, many women who had worked in the factories and held the homefront together experienced the resistance to return that characterized the autonomous male of the earlier period; they didn’t want to be reabsorbed into the hegemonic patriarchy that dictated their roles.

American psychologist Philip Cushman argues that this time period saw the creation of the empty self. According to Cushman, both postwar advertising and therapeutic cultures construct the self as empty so that they can offer products and services that will fill it. The advertising and therapy that he looks at are pretty straightforwardly situated; they use the simple pattern of identifying a problem, and offering a cure. I think it is useful to extend his argument by locating it generationally. The reason for the postwar boom in advertising was the rapidly rising standard of living. If you struggle to have enough food to get through the day, for instance, you really don’t need too many fancy, burpable storage containers for leftovers. Likewise, if you can’t afford a house, you don’t need to furnish it according to your taste and convenience, and if you can only afford one or two suits of clothes, practicality will trump fashion. This was the situation of many parents of Baby Boomers, who were less concerned about authenticity than they were about achieving a place in society and providing for their children; they embraced the characterization of “organization man” because it meant financial security and a way to achieve a stable identity. However, the key problems of Boomer culture, one could argue, centered on a surplus of goods created by unprecedented economic growth following World War II. With abundance comes the ability to craft a lifestyle, rather than simply make a living, and as ability is always shadowed by an imperative—if you can, you must!—Boomers were faced with a proliferation of choices to solve what were becoming more complex problems. As Strenger points out, since material well-being was no longer considered a significant achievement, Boomers’ values were at odds with those of their parents, and a cultural revolution that questioned those values as stifling and oppressive soon followed (131). This cultural revolution, which in Jungian terms severed the connection between the *puer aeternus* and the *senex*, sought to throw off the constraints of societal roles and rules and to challenge easy allegiances to dominant political and social ideologies. Ideologically and materially, it led to the realization of one of the most significant conditions for the *puer aeternus* to emerge as a viable way of living in the world rather than a pathology: the development of a “fatherless society.”
The cultural revolution of the 60s and 70s set adolescents against their parents as well as against authoritative structures themselves. From the grand to the banal, anything that bore the taint of a parental injunction—save sex for marriage, obey the law, stay in school, keep yourself clean, get a haircut, etc.—came under suspicion and provided a site for rebellion rather than identification. When Boomers became parents, then, they were largely unwilling or perhaps unable to make rules and set boundaries for their own kids. Still chafing under the sense of having been oppressed by the rules set by their parents, or perhaps too plagued by the guilt that any rules they did impose would be hypocritical based on their own past experiences, they refused to set themselves up either as role models or as authority figures for their Generation X children. Teachers, too, lost much of their authority as students challenged canonical wisdom and conventional modes of learning, and as the teachers themselves were encouraged by revolutionary educators like Paolo Freire to abandon the “banking concept of education” in favor of student-centered learning models. A general mood of iconoclasm disrupted unchallenged respect for political, religious, and historical figures. In short, any figure or institution that might fill the ideological position of the father was called into question. Combine that with a rising divorce rate that left more and more children to be reared without actual fathers in their homes, and I think we can effectively say that we have realized to a stunning degree Alexander Mitscherlich’s 1967 prediction of a “fatherless society.” Nor does it look as though GenXers will be redressing this condition; Strenger notes that “[m]any GenXers seem not to feel the desire or value of raising the next generation,” speculating that their “sense of detachment from the past” may account for their reluctance to parent (46-47). I would add that their lack of positive, effective role models as well as the “bad press” that fathering and father substitutes has received over the past thirty-odd years make fatherhood a less than desirable profession.

The movement toward a “fatherless society” creates one of the conditions that vaults the puer aeternus from a pathology to a new paradigm for the self. As we have become a society characterized by a failure of paternal metaphors that act as firm sites for emulation or rebellion, the movement of Generations X and Y through progressive stages of self-formation and realization is disrupted. What was once regarded as the rightful province of adolescence—self-experimentation, messianic idealism, the quest for limit experiences, a fascination with dangerous or extreme sports, a sense that one’s identity is provisional and unfinished—has moved from being a rocky and treacherous psychic geography we traverse on our way to the more stable homeland of adulthood into the homeland itself.

Additionally, as von Franz points out, the puer aeternus is troubled by an outstanding mother complex. Mothers are arguably the most powerful person in a child’s life, for good or ill. The “good-enough” mother will abdicate her power gently and responsibly, allowing the child psychic space and providing support as the child develops associations with other adults, most notably a father-figure who will become both a source of authority and a site for identification. A devouring mother will not abdicate such power, and without a father strong enough or interested enough to claim the child and wrest it away from such a mother’s consuming threat, the child will transmogrify the mother into either a goddess or a monster. The fatherlessness of society renders the mother and her substitutes that much more powerful and thus creates a greater condition of possibility for the child to remain an eternal youth.

In his fascinating study, The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image, Leonard Shlain presents a comprehensive argument that the image is associated with the feminine, whereas alphabetic literacy is associated with the masculine. Obviously, the image is more primal than the word; language develops in the first years of life, and alphabetic literacy emerges quite late in terms of psychic development, but we take in images from birth. As a result, images are more likely to captivate and fascinate us, in the technical senses of those words, than words require that we translate them into images that we generate from memories and associations. Hence, the more-or-less passive fascination with which we receive images takes us back, at least partially, to a primal, infant-like state, casting us as viewers in the role of the eternal child. If images are in fact related to the feminine, as well as to our own child-like states, then our increasingly image-based culture adds ideological support to the development of the puer aeternus; not only have we lost paternal structures, but we have become inundated with irresistible maternal ones.

In this context of absent and ineffectual fathers and omnipresent mothers, Lasch identifies the “pathological narcissist” as the dominant structure of the self in late capitalism. He characterizes
this personality type in ways that map nearly identically onto the attributes von Franz posits for the puer, most notably the adoption of what H. G. Baynes calls a “provisional life” (von Franz 2). Like the *puer aeternus*, the pathological narcissist experiences “a terrific fear of being pinned down, of entering space and time completely, and of being the specific human being that one is” (2). Selfhood is a fluid event for the pathological narcissist; again like the puer, he lives in a state of continual self-experimentation, which Lifton optimistically calls our Protean capability. The pathological narcissist/ *puer aeternus* is controlled by his desire to resist what he would see as a descent into what Michel Foucault calls a “normative maturity.” In Foucauldian terminology, the pathological narcissist uses “techniques of the self” to develop an “aesthetic of existence,” which in turn constitutes the self. He is not a self performing a role; he *is* his performance of the self. The key to making the performance work, according to Strenger, is to preserve the sense of choice and autonomy. Now, obviously, most of the material that we use to create the self is not of our own making. We are not, as Strenger is careful to point out, “self-created” (160). But we are also not willing to concede our identity to some sort of environmentally overdetermined destiny. So the *puer aeternus* give birth to, or at least authors himself, or thinks he does.

For the generations that preceded the Boomers, the idea of the self and its development were supported by the myths of Western culture. Oedipus thought he could escape his fate, Odysseus struggles through hardship to return home, Vainamoinen sought the Sampo in order to help his people. The Bible and the Mabinogian tell story after story of mistakes and redemption, stiff-necked rebellion and unmerited grace. Patterns reinforced a monomythic ideal of the good life and how to achieve it. Strenger argues that Generations X and Y are cut off from these traditions and self-structuring myths in unprecedented ways. When the theorists of the 60s and 70s were busily busting the canon of Western culture, they were doing so from a position of investment; these were their intellectual father figures that they were taking on. For instance, Strenger states poignantly,

Derrida wrote book after book in which he played with the texts that purport to do exactly what he thinks cannot be done. By playing with them, taking them apart, and putting them together again, Derrida performs a protracted ritual of mourning an illusion he had helped to dismantle. (173)
A man is a god in ruins. When men are innocent, life shall be longer, and shall pass into the immortal, as gently as we awake from dreams. Now, the world would be insane and rabid, if these disorganizations should last for hundreds of years. It is kept in check by death and infancy. Infancy is the perpetual Messiah, which comes into the arms of fallen men, and pleads with them to return to paradise. (54)

Like Wordsworth before him, he employs the romanticized characteristics of the puer to argue for a reconnection of man to nature so that man might achieve his true potential. But this discourse is so disconnected from the contemporary puer aeternus as to be barely recognizable. Today's puer has the task not of reuniting humans with their natural world in order to maximize their humanity, but of helping contemporary people negotiate technology and the possibilities it generates so that we may come to terms with our posthuman identity.

Certainly, nostalgic, Emersonian treatments exist in movies that emphasize both the importance of and our cultural ambivalence toward the puer aeternus. The films About a Boy and Disney's The Kid are perhaps the best recent examples. Hugh Grant's character, Will, in About a Boy, is a clear example of the puer aeternus as a pathology. Will lives on the royalties of a goofy Christmas song that his father wrote. It is a wildly popular tune, but Will hates it, and he is haunted in the film by his father, who was apparently an alcoholic who just got lucky—not someone who can serve as an effective role model for maturity. Will refuses to work or settle down, and, though he claims he would like to fall in love, he is initially more committed to the Don Juanism characteristic of the puer aeternus. To facilitate his goal to meet available women, he pretends to be a single father so that he can join a single parents group. Through the group, he meets a troubled, geeky, equally fatherless boy named Marcus, who gloms onto Will and eventually, through forcing him to face the meaningless of his life which is based on appearances with no real emotional connections, helps Will to grow up by taking on emotional responsibility for someone other than himself. Throughout the film, Will is shown as someone who is more concerned with the appearance of things that the substance. His days are spent shopping and at the salon, and his first attempts at caring for Marcus are to buy him cool clothes. Clearly, Will's perpetual state of boyishness is presented as problem that must be solved; since he is unwilling to

identify with his own father, he plays at being a father until a child appears and forces him to take on the role of an ideal father, a role which he eventually makes real.

In Disney's The Kid, Russ Duritz is, significantly, an image consultant, who has lost touch with his inner child. Overly identified with the senex, he is unable to play, to appreciate nature, to relate to his father, or to move into a committed relationship with Amy, a woman who can do all of these things. Instead, he ruthlessly manipulates the public images of his clients, disallowing any authentic reactions they might have to situations in favor of carefully managed performances. He is portrayed as a jerk, which strengthens the critique of performative identity in an image-based culture. Russ first plumaged by the mysterious appearance of a red plane, and then by a child who turns out to be his eight-year-old self. As a desire to escape from earth is part of the puer archetype, the plane acts as a herald that the puer is about to make an appearance. It also points to the source of Russ's failure to mature—the plane was a birthday present that commemorated the last year of his prematurely truncated childhood, the year his mother died. When he successfully integrates his puer with his senex, the plane serves as an actualization of that integration; Russ becomes a pilot in later life. The messianic quality of the puer aeternus is thus limited here to saving oneself, and when the child Russ is no longer needed, he disappears; the adult Russ has grown into an integrated maturity. These films, of course, represent the standard plot line for traditional films for young people: the resolution to the problem comes about through the character's maturation, through the integration of the senex with the puer aeternus so that a balanced personality is achieved.

In movies aimed more squarely at Generation X and Y audiences, however, the coming-of-age narrative is somewhat disrupted. The messianic idealism that these movies foreground claims childhood as its necessary condition; contemporary heroes and heroines have to save the world before bedtime, that is, metaphorically speaking, before they become integrated adults. Their childlikeness and their connectedness to the particular features of the puer aeternus are what enable them to do their job. For instance, in The Powerpuff Girls—The Movie, Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup first attempt to integrate into normal society. They attend kindergarten, and are introduced to the game of tag. Because they can fly and have superpowers, both key puer aeternus fantasies, they engage in an extreme game of tag that destroys their city. Professor
Utonium admonishes them that they must hide their powers, but it is precisely in doing so that they become vulnerable to JoJo, the evil monkey. Because they decide they must walk home rather than fly, they get lost, and JoJo finds them and convinces them to help him with his plan to make Townsville a better place. As JoJo, maniacally transformed into MoJo JoJo, ravages the city (turns out he wanted to make the city a better place for monkeys, not people), the girls realize that the only way to save Townsville is to use their superpowers, but for genuine good this time. The message is subtle, but clear enough: These perpetual little girls are the only hope for Townsville, but only when they are allowed to act as proper puer aeternus—impetuous, flying, fighting messiahs.

Kim Possible, Harry Potter, Carmen and Juni Cortez of Spy Kids, teen CIA agent Cody Banks, and even Spiderman all follow similar patterns as they fight to save the world in between school assignments and sports practices. In each instance, youth is pitted against age as the villains they encounter are always adults. The children use a variety of gadgets and rely on their specialness and their facility with extreme sports to defeat their enemies, reinforcing the cultural myth that these attributes are to be valued over the more cerebral machinations of adult plotting. Whereas James Bond, with his womanizing tendencies and his own affinity for extreme sports and limit experiences, as well as the continual replacement of his character with younger actors, might exemplify a symbolic puer aeternus, these contemporary films have literalized the metaphor, and offer it as a positive cultural script for identity formation. Indeed as the genre becomes more and more youth-oriented, Hollywood seems to be making fewer movies about adult superheroes, and more about children who save their parents, their cities, and their world.

Catch That Kid presents an exemplary narrative about the messianic possibilities of the puer aeternus. When Maddy’s father, who has been injured in a mountain-climbing accident, becomes paralyzed—yet another way to become fatherless—his only hope is a $250,000 experimental surgery, not covered by insurance. Her mother’s attempts to secure a loan fail, so Maddy decides to take matters into her own hands by planning to rob the bank for which her mother is designing an elaborate security system. As a female version of the puer, she feels estranged from and competitive with her mother and wants to emulate and rescue her father, whose hobby of mountain climbing and occupation of owning a go-cart track identify him as a puer himself. Maddy even exhibits a sort of calculated Don Juanism, as she pretends to be romantically attracted to both of her best friends in order to secure their help in her plan. Maddy, like her father, is a climber, Gus is a mechanical whiz kid, and Austin is a computer genius, all three avocations occupying that space that links contemporary culture and the eternal youth archetype. Their plans almost succeed and they manage to escape prosecution precisely and only because they are kids, and the ultimate result is an outpouring of community support and the promise of a loan, so they do in fact use puer aeternus strategies to save Maddy’s puer aeternus father.

As these films demonstrate, our cultural embrace of the puer aeternus as a privileged construction of the self is by no means unambiguous. While we seem to embrace its fascination with extreme sports and limit experiences, and while we put our trust in its messianic potential especially in terms of technology, we distrust its protean nature, its continual drive for self-experimentation and reinvention. While we sing along with songs like “Forever Young,” inject our faces with Botox, don red hats, and slurp up Viagra and Cialis, we also indulge in a cultural narrative of fear based on school shooters in sinister black trenchcoats and spiky-haired, tattooed gangbangers. Mostly, we are ambivalent about the future of technology, which seems inextricably bound with the contemporary manifestations of the puer aeternus. Video games and action movies fuel our desire for extreme sports and limit experiences. Technology makes self-experimentation and reinvention increasingly possible and accessible to people, in either the actual or the virtual realm, and its effervescence ensures that provisionality becomes a natural way of approaching one’s life. Even cell phone companies advertise no long-term commitment options, partially because the technology changes so fast. This ambivalence leads us to cultural fantasies like Artificial Intelligence: AI, where we seek to domesticate our technology, and its inextricable partner the puer aeternus, by making their conjunction actually lovable. As long as David, the child robot, performs the role of the perfect child, exhibiting unconditional love, absolute devotion to the mother, cheerful obedience, naive disobedience, and aching vulnerability, we can love and extend our empathy to him. He is our future, our hope for continuation and possibly even resurrection. But the image that ends the film, with the child in bed with his dead mother, perhaps for eternity, is decidedly more creepy than sweet—shades of Psycho mar the sentimental pathos the director was most likely trying to achieve.
The recent film version of Chris van Allsburg’s *The Polar Express* not only combines most of the patterns of the *puer aeternus* archetype, but can also be interpreted as a comment on the profound ambivalence with which we hold the notion of the eternal child. The film’s imagery, plot line, and formal technique suggest an ideology both profound and disturbing with regard to the *puer aeternus* archetype’s relation to self-construction and its cultural consequences. The imagery, first of all, is typical *puer* fare: a child on the brink of leaving childhood belief behind, boards a train—traditional masculine imagery—which takes him as far as one can go without actually “slip[ping] the surly bonds of earth”—the North Pole. According to von Franz, this represents an “exteriorized spiritual longing” (3) to break away from the mother. There is no evidence of what might be behind the boy’s outstanding mother complex, if indeed he has one, and yet this symptom seems to have universal resonance. We might speculate that the mother complex has been generalized through the new breed of helicopter parents, who hover about their children, obsessively attending to their physical and emotional safety and well-being, as would be supported by the hushed conversation the boy overhears about his impending disilusion with the Santa Claus myth—here both parents contribute to the sense of keeping the child enclosed in a fantasized space of plenitude from which he needs to break away, primarily because it is based on a culturally-enforced illusion.

The train ride is both harrowing and exhilarating, the destination made all the sweeter by the danger of the journey. The boy himself rides both inside and outside of the train, and has several near-fatal accidents, but is saved by what turns out to be a ghost, a wise but transient version of himself, suggesting a reversal of the ideological position exemplified in *The Kid*. For Russ, the *puer aeternus* functions as the temporary figure who disappears when he is no longer needed; here, the *senex* plays that role. Important at moments of crisis, he needn’t occupy a more permanent place in one’s life. Additionally, peril at high speeds seems to have become *de rigueur* in films for children who have become adrenaline junkies through their exposure to video games, but it is also explicitly connected to von Franz’s description of the *puer* pathology; hence my assertion that what was once pathology has become the new norm. The slim plot line also reinforces the ideology of the importance of being *puer*. The entire adventure has been orchestrated as an obstruction to the boy’s putting away of childish things; growing up is not inevitable, or even desirable, if one has the advantage of trains appearing in the night and bells that ring only for those who have the childlike ears to hear them.

The most revealing aspect of the film for this reading, however, is its technical innovations. The creators used a CGI animation technique called performance or motion capture, “a process by which an actor’s live performance is digitally captured by computerized cameras, and becomes a human blueprint for creating virtual characters” (Phillips 1). While *The Matrix* trilogy suggests quite strongly that our disappearance into a virtual overlay of ourselves is sinister and wrong, *The Polar Express* explicitly celebrates the possibility through its technique. Implicitly, there are ideological contradictions. The facial blankness wrought by the animation technique can be taken to represent an equation between the innocence of belief and the susceptibility to totalitarian fascinations. Several major reviews of the film link the penultimate scene of Santa’s arrival in the square with a similar image from Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*. When this (unintentional?) allusion is paired with the fact that the elves speak Yiddish, the movie’s relationship to history and cultural belief systems seems sinisterly appropriative. In the service of maintaining childlike faith, we have to ignore cultural difference (since when were Jewish elves part of a Christmas tradition?) and historical atrocities (why even intimate that Jews would celebrate the arrival of a Hitleresque Santa?). Without the distinctiveness of cultural affiliation and historical memory, this scene demonstrates how the GenX and GenY *puer aeternus* self may be vulnerable to dangerous fascinations wrought by the imagistic maternal logic of de-individuation that I discussed earlier.

Performance capture also allows Tom Hanks to play five different roles. He is the hero boy, the hero’s father, the conductor, the hobo, and Santa. The potential for an infinitely mutable digital overlay on the same actor calls to mind the problems of assigning a stable identity in a culture defined by continual self-experimentation. On the one hand, we could applaud Hanks’ virtuosity for being able to effectively assume such differing roles; on the other hand, we might suggest that through the digital overlay, we are seeing the real Tom Hanks for the first time—all identity is ultimately virtual, and hence his multiple performances, rather than his more mythically-contrived continuity as actor Tom Hanks, constitute who he is. Alternately, we might read this film the way von Franz reads fairy
tales—each manifestation of character represents a bit of Hanks’ unconscious, and to interpret the film would mean to treat the characters as various aspects of the self. To lose faith in Santa, then, would be to lose faith in the self. That the boy retains his ability to hear the bell, even as those around him lose that ability, suggests that he is in fact that special eternal youth, imbued with the messianic potential to save Christmas, to save others, to save belief itself; he is, after all, Santa, as well as the puer aeternus.

These films, then, offer complex iterations of von Franz’s conclusion that the puer aeternus holds the potential for either self-destruction or cultural renewal and salvation. By literalizing the metaphor of the puer aeternus, they help situate our own ambivalences not only about that archetype, but also about the very status of the self in the current cultural moment. It is my contention that the archetype of eternal youth has become a privileged model for self-fashioning in contemporary culture, arising out of the conditions of fatherlessness and the ubiquity of images, and supported by the continual creation of new cultural myths.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


