

**AUTHENTICITY AND THE FOREST
IN *CAPTAIN FANTASTIC* (2016)
AND *LEAVE NO TRACE* (2018)**

**LA AUTENTICIDAD Y EL BOSQUE
EN *CAPTAIN FANTASTIC* (2016)
Y *LEAVE NO TRACE* (2018)**

MARTINA MARTAUSOVÁ

Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice
martina.martausova@upjs.sk

129

Abstract

A number of recent productions would appear to suggest that American cinema in the 21st century has abandoned the traditional, culturally defined tropes of the American wilderness in favor of its portrayal as an alternative environment for the contemporary American man. This study focuses on the role of the forest as a specific form of the wilderness in two contemporary American films, *Captain Fantastic* (2016) and *Leave No Trace* (2018), analyzing how this background motivates and shapes the authentic representation of the main male protagonist. This form of authenticity, as the study suggests, reflects a more extensive cultural call for the authenticity of American masculinity in American cinema in the 21st century. The crucial aspect in relation to the contemporary representation of the American man in these two films is the father/child relationship that emphasizes the role of the setting in the process of regenerating man's position in society, thereby reflecting the postfeminist characterization of the American man.

Keywords: *Captain Fantastic*, *Leave No Trace*, forest, fatherhood, masculinity.

Resumen

El cine americano del siglo XXI parece haber abandonado el espíritu tradicional del paisaje salvaje estadounidense a fin de crear el escenario alternativo para el hombre estadounidense contemporáneo. Este estudio se centra en el papel desempeñado por el bosque como una forma específica del paisaje silvestre en dos películas estadounidenses contemporáneas: *Captain Fantastic* (2016) y *Leave No Trace* (2018). El estudio analiza como este paisaje transforma y moldea la representación auténtica del protagonista masculino principal y como esta autenticidad refleja la necesidad cultural más amplia de la autenticidad del hombre estadounidense en el cine americano del siglo XXI. El punto clave que se destaca en el contexto de la representación contemporánea del hombre estadounidense en ambas películas es la relación padre-hijo que enfatiza la importancia del entorno en el proceso de la formación del papel del hombre en la sociedad y que refleja la caracterización postfeminista del hombre estadounidense.

Palabras clave: *Captain Fantastic*, *Leave No Trace*, bosque, paternidad, masculinidad.

1. Introduction

[An] authentic account is one that speaks the truth of the author's situation, about the truth of the (absent) others' situation.

Allan Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication".

The pursuit of authenticity¹ in cinema is the pursuit of a chimera. The concept itself might seem, in relation to cinema and representation, almost contradictory, and yet for more than a century filmmakers have shown an unflagging and relentless desire to portray authenticity on screen. This holds true for most American cinema productions, Hollywood as well as independent cinema, but while Hollywood is more preoccupied with the authenticity of reproduction and performance to claim legitimacy and originality of its production, independent cinema focuses instinctively on the authentic image/experience/form itself, often all within a single frame. Postmillennial American cinema has specifically demonstrated its interest in authenticity by presenting a variety of types: authentic characters with authentic flaws as in *Steve Jobs* (2015), *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) or *Leave No Trace* (2018); authentic performances through the casting of non-actors in *Mid90s* (2018) or *Boyhood* (2018); or, as this study proposes, by using environments that encourage an authentic living experience in films such as *Captain Fantastic* (2016) and *Leave No Trace* (2018).

Authenticity and the ability to live authentically have also been the concern of social theories that examine the impact of information technology upon contemporary

Western men. Considerable research has been devoted to the processes by which the potential of western men to benefit from a connection with nature has been replaced with the demand for computerized reality, especially in the digital age. The divorce from nature engendered by modernity has encouraged the investigation of individuals' capability to maintain their access to nature, but the impact of late 20th-century information technology that has significantly accelerated the divorce itself has also disrupted our understanding of the human connection to the natural environment. Social theory has primarily explored the ability of individuals to access their true selves² in the age of data and information or within the "ingenuity of space", a term used by Zygmunt Bauman to refer to a world overwhelmed by the urgency of data processing and the global economy (2007: 83). This ingenuity defines locations in which individuals suffer from alienation produced by the segregation or the entire replacement of social spaces by digital spaces. The progress-driven nature of Western society and the never-ending flow of information and socializing practices that take place via social media rather than in the real world have been the focus of significant study over the past two decades, with a particular emphasis being placed on the effect of contemporary society on individuals (Bauman 2007; Kirby 2015; Lipovetsky 2015; Samuels 2015). Considerable research suggests that the impact is triggered by a growing sense of detachment from the authenticity of life which leads to an inability to access one's true self, a phenomenon which is often demonstrated as a form of social anxiety from which many individuals suffer (Schlegel et al. 2009; Kass 2016).

131

Any attempt to study authenticity in cinema is fraught with difficulty, precisely due to the concept's contradictory relationship to representation. However, the concept can be examined as a social construct through specific cinematic devices that, in relation to the representation of authentic experience, shape the assumed characterization of the main character. *Captain Fantastic* and *Leave No Trace* are examples of a type of film which embraces authenticity and exploits its potential as a device to depict the particular experience of contemporary Western men, more specifically fathers, in a setting that is typically associated with the authenticity of life—the wilderness. The focus in these films is thus on the representation of the wilderness as a form of environment that motivates and shapes the representation of the postmillennial father. The wilderness and the father in the two films are studied as two actants (Greimas 1983); the characterization of the former motivates and shapes the characterization of the latter.

The wilderness was one of the most crucial points of confrontation in the process of the formation of the American character. The pioneer experience served as a vehicle that formed the representation of early visions of America, promoting the idea of opportunity and of a new beginning for civilization. In the American

narrative, Edenic nature has symbolized the “primitive world which lies beyond the margins of cities” (Fiedler 1966: 366) and as such it has been a space for moral, spiritual, and aesthetic regeneration (Peprník 2005: 21-25), far from urban areas in which corruption prospers. Literary depictions of the wilderness typically oscillated between sublime and civilized landscapes, images that are visually best represented by the Hudson River school of artists whose primary focus was the contrast between the untamed American wilderness and cultivated land. In cinema, it was the genre of the Western that celebrated the American landscape to such an extent that it elevated the setting to the position of an actant capable of shaping the way in which the main protagonist is represented (Carmichael 2006; Den Uyl 2010; Kitses 2018). In many ways, the Western constitutes a literal celebration of the American landscape, usually through a focus on pioneers and the progress they wrought on the land, a process in which male protagonists were largely prevalent.

The wilderness as a space fomenting self-identification continues to shape American mythology. A leading representative of this mythology is the American Adam, who has been traditionally associated with virtues such as innocence, purity, and independence (Lewis 1959)³ and who continues to serve as an archetype representing the ideal of the American man in contemporary narratives. 21st-century cinema reflects the yearning for Adam’s innocence in films like *Into the Wild* (2007), inspired by the real-life story of Christopher McCandless who, like many typical male protagonists of American fiction, turns his back upon civilization in order to escape the consumerist, profit-driven, and manipulative society and searches for genuine life experiences in the primitive but liberating wilderness (Fiedler 1966: 26). Similarly, *The Revenant* (2015) portrays an early-nineteenth century frontiersman/explorer (Leonardo DiCaprio) as embodying the relentless American desire for progress and achievement, but then shows how an encounter with the primitive grants him a somewhat transcendental vision of life. In both cases, the wilderness represents an effective and rewarding refuge from civilization when society proves to be too corrupt and damaging. The tendency to demonstrate the healing effect of the wilderness (albeit somewhat limited) on the main protagonists can also be observed in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Wild* (2014), while in the post-apocalyptic *The Road* (2009), it serves as a redemption for—and restoration of—society and civilization.

As in the examples above, the wilderness in *Captain Fantastic* and *Leave No Trace* acts as a refuge from society, a natural habitat in which the protagonists and the children whom they have decided to withdraw from society can live freely. This study examines the universality that the wilderness offers as a crucial attribute of this setting, and one that provides an alternative for American men who feel jeopardized by what Zygmunt Bauman has termed ‘liquid modernity’ (2007) —a highly

developed global society in which the demand for mobility and constant flow of information result in a sense of the impotence of human interaction. It thus serves as an alternative milieu in which the American father in 21st-century American cinema can acquire authentic experiences free from norm-related behavior.

The crisis facing Western masculinity has been the subject of wide-ranging discussion for more than three decades now (Faludi 1991, 1999; Connell 2005; Kimmel 2010 among many others), and the focus on the issue of fatherhood has also grown significantly, especially in millennial film production.⁴ Some authors have argued that the emphasis on fatherhood in postmillennial cinema is suggestive of the need for reconciliation with father figures of the past, who have been for many decades largely absent in American cinema —if not physically, then very often at the emotional level.⁵ In his study of millennial fatherhood, Mike Chopra-Gant points out that the father figure in the 1950s and 1960s “became a dominating figure, not by his presence, but by his absence” (2013: 88). As he explains, while the absence of the father can be physical, the sense of absence is also experienced on a secondary level when the father is “hopelessly deficient in [his] provision of the guidance and direction needed by [his] sons” (2013: 89). The effect of such absence on subsequent generations has been explored in films such as *Fight Club* (1999), *American Beauty* (1999) or *Forrest Gump* (1994), all of which were produced in the 1990s. Timothy Shary also acknowledges the emphasis on the father figure in postmillennial American cinema in his study of millennial masculinity, arguing that due to the “ongoing evolution of male roles (domestic, professional, performative)” and concerns with the effects of such influences on the patriarchal norm, the advent of the 21st century offers a logical opportunity to reexamine the representation of the father on-screen (2013: 4). The father-child relationship is a significant aspect in any analysis of contemporary representations of the American man in cinema. This study will also address the role of the setting in the regeneration of the protagonist’s position in society in terms of postfeminist characterizations that play a considerable role in determining the depiction of men in paternal relationships.

2. *Captain Fantastic*

What we have created here may be unique [...]. We created paradise.

Matt Ross, *Captain Fantastic*.

Captain Fantastic stars Viggo Mortensen as Ben Cash, a non-conformist father of six all living together in an unspecified area somewhere in the Washington forest. Promotional materials for the film include a poster with an image of the family in

an almost defensive pose surrounded by tree branches, which suggests the protective role which the forest plays in a somewhat idyllic context, but it does not reveal the extent to which the family makes use of the wilderness, both physically and psychologically. The opening of the film introduces viewers to pastoral notions of the setting, emphasizing the vastness of the forest in which humans —other than the family— are only occasional visitors. Scenes of peace and tranquility show how the family thrives in this harmonious, almost transcendental, setting. But soon after this introduction the viewer is made aware of the real function of the forest in the film and also of Ben's intention to use the environment to develop and cultivate qualities in his children which are no longer valued in a contemporary urban setting; qualities such as persistence, endurance, and self-sufficiency. The audience frequently observes all six children, regardless of their age, repeatedly shown engaged in dangerous activities —climbing steep rock faces in severe weather conditions or hunting wild animals armed only with a knife. Injuries, ranging from the minor to the more serious, appear to be a fairly common occurrence. The forest in *Captain Fantastic* is soon transformed from an Arcadia into an arena where survival skills are practiced and tested, and Ben's uncompromising insistence on self-sufficiency makes him the ultimate authority figure. At the same time, the forest is an asylum for the father whose decision to abandon civilization was a deliberate choice after he and his wife had decided to escape from the seductive influences of American capitalism.

134

Ben, *the* Captain Fantastic, is the kind of visitor who approaches the wilderness with the intention and ability to process natural materials, thus benefiting from resources the environment provides (Turner 2002: 466-467). He lives with the kids in a camp with no infrastructure, consisting only of a few wooden huts and teepees which they have built by themselves. They hunt animals and grow plants for food, make their own appliances and produce everything that they can by themselves in order to live as self-sufficiently as possible. Ben's conscious approach to the wilderness resembles that of exercising dominion over the natural world (Turner 2002: 474), and this requires not only wood crafting skills but also physical strength and mental toughness to endure the discomforts that such a life entails. For most of the opening section of the film Ben is seen carrying out physical tasks, activities associated with masculine energy; in other words, performing his masculinity.⁶ According to Judith Butler's influential work, gender is always performative (1990, 2004) and the performative aspect of masculinity has since been interpreted as an exhibition of manly authority (or its lack thereof). In relation to cinematic representations of the Western man, this theory has been covered by many influential authors. However, the performative aspect of masculinity in connection to fatherhood has been largely overlooked in academic research.

In addition to being an instructor of practical skills and a mentor of essential survivalist knowledge, Ben also tutors his children, giving them a proper education that is more rewarding in social environments other than the forest. In order to foster his strong political views among his children, Ben insists that his family study social and political theories critical of capitalism, insisting that the children reach their own interpretation of these texts. His choice of authors such as Noam Chomsky (and the fact that Ben coins “Chomsky Day” to celebrate the theorist) demonstrates Ben’s preoccupation with works that encourage critical thinking. The father’s attention to survivalist skills and critical thinking reflects his need to leave behind the conventional capital-driven environment where these skills are no longer esteemed, especially in the urban areas where Ben comes from. Ben has abandoned the urban environment and returned to the wilderness like the classic former city-dweller who has returned to the mythical frontier (Turner 2002: 466) in order to develop and preserve capabilities that can only be acquired through the intensity of life experience. At the same time, however, he also takes pains to ensure that his children will be prepared for life back in civilized society. In a flashback into Ben’s past, the audience learns that his intention to isolate the family from the negative impact of consumerism was part of a larger plan that he and his late wife Leslie (Trin Miller) had agreed on. The couple had purchased the land in the wilderness before they isolated themselves and their children there; their situation is therefore both an experiment in alternative living and also a legally sound and thoroughly prepared project.

135

This plan, and the film’s overall transcendentalist embrace of the wilderness, is strongly reminiscent of Henry David Thoreau’s attempt to discover whether people could live an authentic life in the wilderness. Thoreau sought transcendental inspiration from the wilderness and, transformed by this experience, aimed to return to civilization in order to challenge its norms. Thoreau thus submitted himself to life in the forest and nourished his inner wilderness (Peprník 2005: 225), subsequently returning to society to talk about the authenticity of nature and his experiences of living within it. Ben, however, takes this experiment even further and uses the forest as a means of teaching his children about the economy of a sustainable and authentic life; once they have received this knowledge and experience, they can return to society and challenge it from within. In this process, the father takes on the role of an intermediary, ensuring that skills and experience can be successfully transferred to the next generation, to prepare them to cope with their responsibilities in the most effective manner. In one early scene in the film in which Ben’s eldest son, Bodevan (George MacKay), successfully hunts a deer, we can see how Ben is able to exploit the potential of the forest. In this scene, the audience not only observes the killing of an animal but themselves become part of a ritual ceremony of initiation. As Bodevan acknowledges the

deer's sacrifice by accepting a bloody morsel of its flesh, a ritual which is conducted in complete silence and in an almost atavistic manner, the boy, naked and camouflaged, also acknowledges and accepts his responsibility, whether familial, social or political. In order to emphasize the sanctity of the moment, the father proclaims: "Today, the boy is dead. And in his place... is a man" (Ross 2016: mins. 4.30-4.45). In mythology, the forest acts as a place in which initiation processes take place because it is the only setting that allows for the growth of skills and abilities that can be acquired through feats of daring that grant physical and mental strength (or strengthening) and which eventually lead to the transformation from boy to man (Peprník 2005: 22-24).⁷ It is a place of trials that brings about the hero's encounter with his inner strength, but it is also a place of solitude which enables contemplation that encourages assertiveness and determination, a process that ultimately contributes to another important aspect of initiation—self-identification (2005: 25). The involvement of a father figure is a classical feature of the transformation process which initiation rituals represent. The father-son relationship thus creates an analogy to the cycle of nature—death and rebirth—in which the rebirth is manifested by the son who completes the cycle (2005: 26).

136

Culturally, as Peprník suggests, the essence of such a transformation in the narrative is the principle of death and rebirth into the new social role that the hero adopts upon his return to civilization (2005: 27). The hero is transformed in the forest and returns to society ready to challenge it. Once Ben and his children leave the forest to attend the funeral of the now deceased Leslie, the process of their confrontation with society starts to unfold. Simultaneously, the implications of one of the most potent narrative devices—the absence of the mother—gain importance in the narrative.⁸ The confrontation with normative behavior is a challenge to the father, who is repeatedly forced to defend his decision to alienate his children from society. This is particularly evident in the scene where he visits his sister in law Harper (Kathryn Hahn) and her family—her husband Dave (Steve Zahn) and her two sons, Jackson, 13, and Justin, 15. After being accused of neglecting his children's education and neglecting the structure that Harper sees as essential for a proper upbringing, Ben confronts Harper's two teenagers over their knowledge of the Bill of Rights. After the boys answer—"ah ... something about costs, I guess?" and "It's ... ah ... government thing, I think" (Ross 2016: mins. 56.25-56.50)—he prompts his own eight-year-old daughter Zaja to answer. Not only does she cite the full definition of the document word-for-word but she also provides her own interpretation of its social and political implications on the lives of individuals. More resonant in this context, however, are Harper's concerns with Ben's parenting abilities:

Harper: Sorry, but your kids, they are without their mother now, I don't think you have any idea what you're doing to them!

Ben: I'm saving their lives, that's what I'm doing...

Harper: Ben, you sound so ridiculous...

Ben: Is knowing how to set a broken bone, or how to treat severe burn ridiculous? Knowing how to navigate by the stars in total darkness, that's ridiculous? How to identify edible plants, how to make clothes from animal skins, how to survive in the forest with nothing but a knife, that's ridiculous to you? (Ross 2016: mins. 55.20-55.45)

As the journey continues, Ben's unconventional parenting methods continue to come into conflict with more traditional approaches, whether when shopping in stores or in their eventual arrival at the home of the children's grandparents where the funeral is scheduled to take place. With Ben's discomfort growing after each confrontation over "his way of doing things", it becomes clear that the journey has transformed into Ben's defense of his paternal authority, a force which seems to have become weakened upon leaving the forest. The forest fosters this authority because it is far from the irritations and restrictions of the home (Fiedler 1966: 26) where the father is subjected to scrutiny both from society and the mother-wife figure and its standardized parenting methods. Ben's authority in the forest is derived from his ability to confront physical challenges, but the challenges which he faces in civilization are psychological in nature and are thus beyond his control. On the other hand, this confrontation also provides Ben with a platform from which he can justify his parenting methods and defend his decision to allow his children to live as individuals. He wishes to protect them from the impact of consumerism, technology-oriented education and entertainment, aspects of the civilized world which cause individuals to lose their agency in favor of prosthetic gadgets and devices which can both extend human experience but also numb essential capabilities and intellectual abilities. As the film's director Matt Ross has said, Ben denies his children the opportunity to form social bonds in order to develop their child-like awareness of the real world (West et al. 2016: 39).

The eventual restoration of the narrative status quo comes with Ben's assertion of his moral authority after he responds to the needs of his children and places them ahead of his own. The revelation of Ben's humility comes with his acceptance of his children's desire to stay and live with their grandparents in civilization. This decision, however, comes only after the world of civilized society has witnessed a mistake on Ben's part that results in Vespyr (one of Ben's older daughters) incurring a serious injury. Ben sends Vespyr to spy on her brother Rellian from the roof of her grandparents' house but she falls and is taken to hospital, where Ben is finally confronted with socially constructed responsibilities that ultimately force him to come to terms with his guilt. In a similar accident involving Rellian which

138 occurred while the family were still living in the forest, unseen by civilization, Ben's confidence did not seem to have been affected so deeply. Rell injures his hand while climbing a cliff, but this incident does not prompt Ben to consider the appropriateness of the conditions which he has created for the family, nor does it prompt any sense of guilt on his part. Ben's confidence and authority are severely diminished when surrounded by civilized society, where his ability to be his true self seems to weaken through endless confrontations with normative behavior. In a psychological study, Schlegel et al. suggest that an individual's true self and their ability to access it "is an important contributor to well-being" (2009: 473). One of the implications of this study is that the (in)ability to cognitively access one's true self affects the experience of the meaning of life (2009: 473). That is, if Ben's access to his true self was diminished upon leaving the forest, an environment in which he is the sole source of unquestioned authority, his understanding of who he is and where he belongs would, according to Schlegel et al.'s argument, also become diminished. The forest, as a physical space that provides ideal conditions for Ben, serving as a means of escape which is more social than physical, thus also represents a space in which his abilities and competencies remain unquestioned by other authority figures. The forest serves as an isolated and sparsely populated environment that remains unaffected by the social norms and norm-relevant behavior that do so much to suppress critical thinking in more civilized and cultivated environments. However, if Ben is to fulfill his role and maintain the post-feminist characterization indicating a new social position for the American man, his response to the necessity to leave this asylum has to be conditioned by the ability to provide his children with proper guidance and direction so that they can continue to challenge society. And thus when he is faced with his children's strong desire to attend their mother's funeral despite their grandparents' disapproval, Ben yields to them, even though this means leaving his safe haven and exposing the results of his unorthodox parenting methods to public scrutiny. He declares, "We can't go to mommy's funeral. We have to do what we are told [...]. We have to shut up and accept it... Well, fuck that!" (Ross 2016: mins. 29.15-29.50), at which point they all resolve to go, and singing *Scotland the Brave* set out on the journey to bid the mother farewell.

The most critical moment of the film, and one that confirms the effect and the legacy of the wilderness experience, comes in the final scene with Bodevan's recognition of his true self, or rather what appears to be his true self. Although the family eventually returns to civilization in acknowledgement of their social nature, their experience of life in the wilderness has encouraged their confidence and made them more resistant to social obligations, restraints and expectations. Bodevan chooses to pursue his own desires and makes a decision that does not conform to the general expectations of his extended family, but one that reflects his father's

teachings. With the children's sense of confidence that comes as the ultimate reassertion of their father's paternal authority, the film essentially celebrates the father and his remarkable abilities. He is a father figure who, unconcerned by social conformity, insists on maintaining his way of doing things in the forest and thus manages to project his influence onto his children.

3. *Leave No Trace*

'What if the kids at school think I'm strange 'cause of the way we were living?'
'How important are their judgments?'

Debra Granik, *Leave No Trace*.

While *Captain Fantastic* depicts a father figure who eventually abandons the environment that signifies the authenticity of living and returns to civilization, *Leave No Trace* presents a very different approach. The film is an adaptation of the 2009 novel *My Abandonment* by Peter Rock which was based on actual events. The plot of the film follows the story of a father, Will (Ben Foster), and his daughter Thomasin or Tom (Thomasin McKenzie) who have abandoned civilization and live deep in the Oregon forest. The pair were discovered by the police and social services in 2004 after tourists to the area had reported seeing a child in the forest. As with *Captain Fantastic*, which was partially inspired by the director's real-life experiences of growing up in a remote commune (West et al. 2016: 34), the primary focus of the film falls on the real-life experiences of the father. The film explores a variety of social issues through the character of Will, a traumatized veteran of the Iraq War who is unable to readapt to life in civilization after returning from a particularly traumatic mission, but it is also a story that draws parallels between the impact of war-inflicted traumas and that of the relentless pursuit of the American Dream in modern-day USA. The effect of these traumas is projected in the film as a form of social anxiety and inability to cope with everyday obligations or commitments.

The 2018 film shares its title with the federally funded program 'Leave No Trace' that encourages campers and backpackers to adopt a more ecologically-minded ethic when staying in the wilderness.⁹ This program is one result of a broader environmental movement that called for greater protection of the American wilderness, and the goal of the program was to guide and educate tourists about ways in which they could minimize their impact on nature. The basic principle that guidebooks and guidelines proposed to promote the minimal impact ethic was for visitors to bring all of the equipment which might be needed to survive, but crucially also to take it away with them when they leave, thereby avoiding the need

to build cabins, make fireplaces, or kill animals during the time spent in the forest (Turner 2002: 473-474). The principle of the Leave No Trace ethic is a rejection of humankind's dominion over nature, and the guidelines also emphatically abandon the masculine rhetoric that was previously used to refer to the "woodcrafter" or camper whose experience is closely tied with control (Turner 2002: 474); all of these ideas were, of course, embraced by Ben in *Captain Fantastic*.

In *Leave No Trace*, Will and his daughter live in the forest much like soldiers on the front line. They move to a different location every two weeks in order to avoid being accidentally spotted by hikers or visitors to the park. They have reduced their belongings to the absolute minimum so, in the event of an emergency, they can pack within seconds and leave undetected, thus also minimizing any traces of their presence. Instead of a hut they use a canvas tent as a shelter; when they run out of water, they use rainwater. Will, like Ben, trains and teaches Tom techniques of survival but also those of escape and ambush so that she will be able to vanish into the forest if necessary. Will also insists on giving Thomasin a proper education; in fact, when the father and daughter are finally discovered by the police and checked by social services, Tom performs exceptionally well and demonstrates a level of knowledge far in advance of her peers. But Tom also appears to be more competent generally than her father. When she accompanies him to the city to obtain supplies and medication, it is Tom who does the talking, whether in the hospital or at a grocery store. Thus when the father proves incapable of coping with civilization, it is left to Tom to take over responsibility and she also looks after him when his anxieties overwhelm him. Thomasin becomes a kind of extension of her father's existence that is limited by the inability to deal with social commitments; the maturity she displays in her interactions with civilized society only reiterates the inability of her father.

As a former soldier, Will suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which, in his case, is expressed in the form of anxiety, insomnia or frequent panic attacks induced by the sound of helicopters, either real or imagined. PTSD can also cause angry outbursts, memory loss or mutism, a disorder where individuals remain silent which is typically accompanied by social anxiety (Hekman in Moss and Prince 2014: 116). Will is withdrawn; he rarely speaks in public, only when necessary, and most of the talking is done by Tom who, unlike her father, enjoys the company of her peers. Will, in contrast to Ben, the Captain Fantastic, is not so fixed in his ways as to deny his daughter simple pleasures in life, as we see in the scene in a shop when, holding a candy bar, Tom asks: "Want, or need?", to which Will replies: "Both" (Granik 2018: min. 16.25). However, when Tom finds a necklace on one of the trails in the forest, he does not allow her to keep it. The

stark contrast between the comfort Tom derives from simple pleasures and Will's aversion to the possession of material things due to his war-inflicted traumas is made evident. Will's abandonment of materialism is a direct reference to the distrust of technology and technological products and the potentially devastating effect which they can have on humanity. As with the Captain Fantastic, Will's anxieties indicate that these material objects have a more damaging impact on an individual's mental state than on one's physical condition.

In her study of PTSD, Susan Hekman suggests that traumatized soldiers often struggle due to the loss of their identity. As she explains, "without a distinctive identity that one can slip into, one's ontological status is erased: one ceases to be" (in Moss and Prince 2014: 119). Will struggles to exist beyond the range of accepted identities; moreover, he is aware that he can no longer cope with or fit into any preexisting identities. His escape from a norm-focused environment into one in which he is isolated from normative behavior seems driven by an urgency and necessity which is best demonstrated by his inability to reconnect with civilization. However, in order to keep custody of Tom after their discovery in the forest, Will agrees to participate in a rehabilitation program that commits him to a regular residence and social responsibilities, but his disdain for social commitments soon becomes apparent to the audience. When Tom comments on their different circumstances by saying that "Everything's different now", Will replies that "We can still think our thoughts" (Granik 2018: mins. 34.50-34.60). With his strong disregard for social authorities, Will urges Tom to remain authentic and true to herself regardless of their social or geographical location. Nevertheless, Tom enjoys this period of their life: she attends school and engages with her peers, but Will continues to struggle to adapt. He seems unwilling or unable to settle; he ignores important paperwork, and seems disengaged at social gatherings and at the Sunday masses that he has committed himself to through the rehabilitation program. In order to understand their new responsibilities, Tom reacts to their church attendance by reading aloud a pamphlet and, while listing possible ways individuals can participate, she asks Will: "Is that why we went?", and Will replies: "We went because Walter¹⁰ asked us to. You dress up and show up on Sunday, and people will believe certain things about you" (Granik 2018: mins. 42.30-42.45). The very next scene shows how helicopters flying overhead intensify Will's anxiety, an allegory of the social commitments which he can barely keep to, let alone appreciate.

The more Will's inability to cope with society becomes apparent in his growing anxiety, the more Tom's sense of belonging develops, nurtured by her life in the community, her friends and the attractions of socialization, all of which leads to a clash between the desires of the two characters. As John Beifuss aptly pointed out

in his review of the film, the plot seems to be built around the central conflict that is “resolved into two competing impulses: the desire to be noticed [represented by the 13-year-old daughter] and the desire to disappear” (2018), represented by the traumatized father. It is through this conflict that the father’s nature is more clearly revealed; juxtaposed with his daughter’s need for society, his withdrawal from civilization into the surrounding wilderness seems more than ever an act of urgency and the result of his own desperation.

But the wilderness in this film is not only a dividing aspect in their relationship, both metaphorically and narratively; it is also a place of reconciliation and, in many respects, of unity. Will is fully aware of his parental commitments and responsibilities towards Tom and struggles and fights to take care of her. But with each of his failures that she witnesses, Tom comes to understand that their escape from society was not an ideological one but one borne of necessity —if Will is to continue to take care of her, he has to find an environment that will allow him to do so. She openly acknowledges her awareness of her father’s problem as she reads a PTSD pamphlet —“Do you have difficulty enjoying things? Have you felt distant or cut off from people? Are you unable to have sad or loving feelings?”— understanding that her father’s answers to all these questions would be positive. Nevertheless, her perception of Will’s need to disappear is often in conflict with her own desires, as in the conversation where she states that “the same thing that’s wrong with you isn’t wrong with me” (Granik 2018: min. 1.35.40).

142

The final and effective resolution to the conflict within this father-child relationship proves to be a commune in the woods, a compromise in which Tom can find a satisfying socializing environment and Will respite from civilization. The real-life commune and its non-actor residents is located in Squaw Mountain Ranch, a nudist resort outside Estacada, Oregon, and was established in 1933. The couple eventually reach the commune after one last attempt to find their peace in the deep forest, in a remote cabin close to which Will gets dangerously injured and from which Tom is forced to seek help from strangers in order to rescue him. This incident resembles the mythical process of initiation, after which Tom acquires the ability to make her own decisions and can finally separate herself psychologically from her father. Soon after the incident Will disappears into the nearby forest, content in the knowledge that his daughter is fully prepared to take care of herself. Tom thus remains part of the community, while Will continues to hold a symbolic connection with her. He becomes an invisible, physically absent father, yet his presence is never in doubt; and ultimately he is a father who has managed to provide his daughter with the guidance and direction needed for her to mature. Tom herself has become a bearer of authentic life experiences who can harness her past in order to challenge society when Will is no longer able to do so.

The last scene of the film suggests that Will's experience is not unique and that there may be more men living in the woods —estranged men who are incapable of coping with society. It hints at the possibility of an entire generation of men suffering from social anxieties, who flee to the forest to escape from the disturbing realities of contemporary Western society in which only appropriate norm-relevant behavior is accepted. The wilderness is the least populated area and one that is unlikely to evoke specific associations with people, and this seems to be the crucial determinant in Will's preference for the forest. In a study of the psychological impact of different environments on human well-being conducted by Stapel et al., the authors suggest that to a large extent an individual's surroundings can "influence people's thoughts, feelings, and actions" (2010: 176), so much so that an environment can determine the relevance of social norms that apply to that environment and shape concerns for normative thinking itself, that is, it can even play a role in encouraging or suppressing norm-related behavior. The study provides evidence that environment can be perceived in a "norm relevant manner" when making associations with such places that include people, thereby transforming the understanding of this environment to a social one (Stapel et al. 2010: 176). In contrast, when we consider environments which lack specific connotations related to people or human activities, such as trees, the authors suggest that relevant norms become less salient (2010: 177). The fathers depicted in *Captain Fantastic* and *Leave No Trace* manage to escape the type of conformity that produces norm-related behavior, but their relationships with their children necessarily involve a certain degree of social interaction which they acquired in civilized society and are as such a certain form of norm-related behavior. But the real significance lies in the choice of those aspects of normativity that the fathers deem to be of importance and practice with their children, and those which they choose to reject. Will's resistance to adhere to social commitments inspires Tom to question standardized social practices, and we also see this in the way in which Ben's contempt for authority encourages his children towards free thinking. But the parenting approaches of both fathers demonstrate their emphasis on fairness, consideration and open-mindedness. With "[w]e can still think our thoughts" (Will) or "Well, fuck that!" (Ben), viewers are confronted with the fathers' urging of critical thinking that ultimately relies on one's accessibility to one's true self, which happens to be, or so the two films certainly seem to suggest, more accessible in the wilderness.

In the process of acquiring the ability to access one's true self, and thereby to experience the authenticity of life, the role of the father figure is just as important as the environment in which the process takes place. The study of environments also explains how one's perception of (non-)social environments can be influenced when primed with significant others such as parents, partners or other authority

figures (Stapel et al. 2010: 177), suggesting that the idea of the forest in itself will not significantly motivate norm-relevant thoughts when such an environment is not associated with people. However, when the concept of the forest is associated with the authority of a significant other, it can induce norm-relevant thoughts, thereby transforming the forest from a non-social environment to a social one. Through their insistence on authentic living experiences which are freed from all social, political, cultural and economic bonds restrictive of one's identity, the fathers protect and raise their children in the forest to ensure that their methods remain undisturbed by society.

4. Conclusion

The forests depicted in the two films are not immediately recognizable locations such as Monument Valley or similar sites which have enjoyed much wider representation as iconic or geographically and culturally defining images. The American forest is different. It is both autonomous and anonymous. It is far from “the urban space in which men began to be affected by anxieties generated by the intensity of the postmodern world, where extraterritorial realities are experienced” (Bauman 2007: 73). It is an original and authentic space without socially established boundaries and as such acts as an alternative. Or so it seems. The films discussed in this study play with the concept of authenticity on several levels, placing a significant emphasis on the types of unadulterated experience which are only possible in this kind of environment. Firstly, the forest isolates the fathers and their children not only from civilization itself, but also from women, from wives and mothers. On the one hand, the absence of women emasculates both of the fathers, depriving them of any sexual ambition, yet on the other hand, it successfully demonstrates their nurturing character and capabilities. Their isolation from feminine figures is a crucial element in allowing them to display their masculine authority, presenting them with the opportunity to escape from what Fiedler calls the “inexplicable loyalty” of men towards women, and the “helplessness” (1966: 320) they are confronted with in this union. Freed from the influence of the feminine, it seems, men can and will do better.

The forest or the wilderness is a concept which is also associated with the masculine world, and this proves to be another effective association that supports the desired characterization of the father figures in these films. The forest becomes a kind of boys' paradise, a playground that is identified with “sport and anti-civilization” and is “simple and joyous” (Fiedler 1966: 355). The fathers' well-being—their confidence and authority—benefits from the simplicity of everyday life in the forest and it is only for the sake of their children that the fathers contemplate a

return to civilization; yet while Ben allows himself to be drawn back into the world of obligations and restrains, Will can only withdraw from it in desperation. Both of these decisions echo the need to preserve the experience of authentic living for the generations of the 21st century whose access to their true selves is severely challenged by the effects of Bauman's 'liquid modernity' (2007). The fathers' desire to expose their children to this kind of experience is also strongly reminiscent of the ambition to restore the energy of the American man whose only aim is to make the world a better place in which to live. This is best expressed in the words of Rellian, who in *Captain Fantastic* points out that "[i]f you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, that there are opportunities to change things, then there is a possibility that you can contribute to making a better world" (Ross 2016: mins. 1.38.40-1.38.60). Ultimately, this is what both fathers do.

The forest in *Captain Fantastic* and *Leave No Trace* is also an environment which places no restrictions on identities or experiences. The settings of both films are defined by this sense of escape from civilization, and the fathers demonstrate features of social impotence that are projected by the at times complete absence of speech —attributes that are, according to Lipovetsky, demonstrations of how postmodernism and its economic intensification of the power of the market and consumerism can influence individuals (2015: 159). This focus on consumerism, as Lipovetsky explains, generates extreme forms of individualism where pathological problems, psychological disturbances and excessive behavior are the most common manifestations of the pursuit of interests in most spheres of life (2015: 159). The American wilderness as a space for moral, spiritual and aesthetic regeneration, promoting the idea of opportunity and a new beginning for civilization, is used in these two films as a setting that prompts the regeneration of the contemporary American man.

Culturally, to complete the mythical cycle of death and rebirth, the forest cleans and heals the fathers of the wounds inflicted by society and it secures the education of a new generation which can continue to challenge society. Fathers here abandon the traditional space used in American cinema to depict either professional or domestic spheres, and choose to seek out an adventurous life, to escape to the wilderness and pursue the alternative American Dream that is transcendental and freed from all material and monetary considerations, for in the forest one either simply is or ceases to be. The only advancement and progress in this environment is towards the acceptance of one's identity, which seems to be the most authentic experience possible and one that ensures the recovery of civilization for future generations, ultimately reaffirming the American Dream. Authenticity here thereby serves the narrative purposes as a device to reconstitute the myth of the American Dream.

And yet, authenticity is a social construct, and the two films depict the forest as an environment which lies outside economic, social and political bonds. The setting is used primarily as a tool to assist the processes of the deinstitutionalization of the American man and his growing inability to conform to social constraints in a civilized setting (Lipovetsky 2015: 158-159). And if cinema is a site of social and cultural exchange (Hallam and Roberts 2014: 3) that can visually articulate our understanding of reality and convey what we believe to be true about a situation or experience, then the films reflect authenticity by presenting the real-life experience of the postmillennial father. On a deeper level, however, they also suggest that these fathers provide a different kind of parenting, either willingly or unwillingly. They are unafraid to defend authentic values, as opposed to those constructed by consumerism and cyberspace, and brave enough to accept responsibility and isolate their kids, to deprive them of social bonds, to rely on their own abilities and to declare themselves the sole authority figure. They are also brave enough to grant their children the experience of a strenuous life and to show society the middle finger and do things their own way.¹¹

146

Notes

1. Authenticity, a key term in this study, refers to the level of accuracy achieved via cinematic representations of reality. Cinema is a medium that conveys a human understanding of reality. As such it often attempts to remain faithful to realism to achieve maximal levels of veracity by the application of devices and mechanisms that reflect authentic experiences in cinema (e.g., use of dialects and specific language, costumes, scenery). For further information about authenticity in cinema, see for example Jonathan Stubbs (2013) or Robert A. Rosenstone (2012).

2. The term 'true self' is used in the study to refer to the ability to reach a level of confidence that one's actions are congruent with one's own beliefs and desires, without external social pressures. This ability entails a resistance to corruption and other influences from mass society. Leslie A. Fiedler describes this condition as being "closest to perfection"

because it is only when individuals are alone with themselves that they can enjoy their integrity (1966: 431).

3. The American Adam is the pursuer of the American Dream and as an archetype continues to occur in American narratives in order to perpetuate the myth among contemporary audiences. For further information, see R.W.B. Lewis (1959), or Jim Cullen (2003).

4. For further information about fatherhood in American cinema, see Bruzzi (2005) or Hamad (2017).

5. A good example of reconciliation with the emotional absence of an otherwise physically present father in postmillennial cinema is *Tree of Life* (2014)

6. For performative masculinity see, for example, Jeffords (1993), Lehman (2001), or Pederby (2011).

Authenticity and the Forest

7. The forest as an archetype of the environment that permits the initiation process to take place is understood here in reference to Vladimir Propp's interpretation of the narrative that essentially relies on folktale narratives (1968).

8. The absence of the mother in favor of the father's characterization in the narrative has been analyzed by Hannah Hamad in "Hollywood Fatherhood: Paternal Postfeminism in Contemporary Popular Cinema" (2013) in particular, where she explains that in order for the father to be able to demonstrate masculine authority and a nurturing character, which is the prevailing understanding of post-feminist characterization, the mother needs to be absent. Cinematic depictions of American

fathers in the late 20th century and early 21st century seem to focus on either single fathers who have already lost their partner, or fathers whose partners significantly fail in their parenting duties and are presented as incompetent, and who subsequently disappear from the narrative.

9. See <https://lnt.org/>.

10. The owner of a tree plantation and employer within the rehabilitation program which Will has committed to.

11. This research was supported by the VEGA 1/0447/20 project "The Global and the Local in Postmillennial Anglophone Literatures, Cultures and Media", granted by the Ministry of Education, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic.

Works Cited

-
- BAUMAN, Zygmunt. 2007. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. New York: Polity.
- BEIFUSS, John. 2018. "10 Best Movies of 2018 (Plus a Second 10)!" *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. <<https://eu.commercialappeal.com/story/entertainment/2018/12/19/top-movies-2018-black-panther-blackkklansman-favourite-hereditary-mr-rogers/2336143002/>>. Accessed February 10, 2020.
- BRUZZI, Stella. 2005. *Bringing up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Postwar Hollywood*. London: BFI.
- BUTLER, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- BUTLER, Judith. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.
- CARMICHAEL, Deborah A. (ed.) 2006. *The Landscape of Hollywood Westerns: Ecocriticism in an American Film Genre*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- CHOPRA-GANT, Mike. 2013. "I'd Fight my Dad: Absent Fathers and Mediated Masculinities in *Fight Club*." In Shary, Timothy (ed.) *Millennial Masculinities*. Detroit: Wayne State U.P.: 85-100.
- CONNELL, R.W. 2005. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- CULLEN, Jim. 2003. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.
- DEN UYL, Douglas J. 2010. "Civilization and its Discontents: The Self-Sufficient Western Hero." In McMahon, Jennifer and Steve Csaki (eds.) *The Philosophy of the Western*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky: 31-54.
- FALUDI, Susan. 1991. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. New York: Anchor Books.
- FALUDI, Susan. 1999. *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- FIEDLER, Leslie A. 1966. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. New York: Stein and Day.
- GRANIK, Debra. 2018. *Leave No Trace*. BRON Studios.

- GREIMAS, Aldirgas Julien. 1983. *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*. Trans. D. McDowell. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- HALLAM, Julia and Les ROBERTS. (eds.) 2014. *Locating the Moving Image: New Approaches to Film and Place*. Bloomington: Indiana U.P.
- HAMAD, Hannah. 2013. "Hollywood Fatherhood: Paternal Postfeminism in Contemporary Popular Cinema." In Gwynne, Joel and Nadine Muller (eds.) *Postfeminism and Hollywood Cinema*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 99-115.
- HAMAD, Hannah. 2017. *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary US Film: Framing Fatherhood*. London: Routledge.
- JEFFORDS, Susan. 1993. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. New Jersey: Rutgers U.P.
- KASS, Sarah. 2016. "Living Authentically in a World with Others." *PsycCRITIQUES* 61 (52): Article 10. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312023218_Living_Authentically_in_a_World_with_Others_A_Review_of_Captain_Fantastic_2016_PsycCRITIQUES_December_26_2016_Vol_61_No_52_Article_10_C_2016_American_Psychological_Association>. Accessed January 15, 2020.
- KIMMEL, Michael S. 2010. *Misframing Men: The Politics of Contemporary Masculinities*. New Jersey: Rutgers U.P.
- KIRBY, Alan. (2009) 2015. "Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture." In Rudrum, David and Nicholas Stavris (eds.): 273-304.
- KITSES, Jim. 2018. *Horizons West: Detecting the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood*. London: The British Film Institute.
- LEHMAN, Peter. 2001. *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*. London: Routledge.
- LEWIS, R.W.B. (1955) 1959. *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- LIPOVETSKY, Gilles. (2005) 2015. "Time against Time, or the Hypermodern Society." In Rudrum, David and Nicholas Stavris (eds.): 156-173.
- MOORE, Allan. 2002. "Authenticity as Authentication." *Popular Music* 21 (2): 209-223.
- MOSS, Pamela and Michael PRINCE. 2014. *Weary Warriors: Power, Knowledge, and the Invisible Wounds of Soldiers*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- PEDERBY, Donna. 2011. *Masculinity and Film Performance: Male Angst in Contemporary American Cinema*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- PEPRNIK, Michal. 2005. *Topos Lesa v Americké Literatuře*. Brno: Host.
- PROPP, Vladimir. 1968. *Morphology of the Folk Tale*. Trans. L. Scott. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- ROSENSTONE, Robert A. 2012. *History on Film, Film on History*. London: Routledge.
- ROSS, Matt. 2016. *Captain Fantastic*. Electric City Entertainment.
- RUDRUM, David and Nicholas STAVRIS. (eds.) 2015. *Supplanting the Postmodern*. London: Bloomsbury.
- SAMUELS, Robert. (2007) 2015. "Auto-Modernity after Postmodernism: Autonomy and Automation in Culture, Technology, and Education." In Rudrum, David and Nicholas Stavris (eds.): 175-206.
- SHARY, Timothy. 2013. *Millennial Masculinity: Men in Contemporary American Cinema*. Detroit: Wayne State U.P.
- SCHLEGEL, Rebecca J., Joshua A. HICKS, Jamie ARNDT and Laura A. KING. 2009. "Thine Own Self: True Self-Concept Accessibility and Meaning in Life." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96 (2): 473-490.
- STAPEL, Diederik A., Janneke F. JOLY and Siegwart M. LINDENBERG. 2010. "Being There with Others: How People Make Environments Norm-Relevant." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 49: 175-187.

Authenticity and the Forest

STUBBS, Jonathan. 2013. *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction*. London: Bloomsbury.

TURNER, James Morton. 2002. "From Woodcraft to 'Leave No Trace': Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America". *Environmental History* 7 (3): 462-484.

WEST, Dennis, Joan M. WEST and Matt Ross. 2016. "Parenting off the Grid with *Captain Fantastic*: An Interview with Matt Ross". *Cinéaste* 42 (1): 34-39.

Received: 23/03/2020

Accepted: 18/11/2020