

What the Hell Do I Do with the Child?: The Persistence of the Father in American Cinema¹

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Abstract

The American father is still a viable character in American cinema. One that capitalizes on its ability to internalize postfeminist sensibilities and embrace the multiplicity of masculine representations. The study explores a model of the American father that benefits from the active undertaking of parenthood and the role the child character plays in such representation of masculinity. Attributing otherness to child characters is, in these cases, a crucial determinant of such representation and reveals an attempt to rehabilitate the white heterosexual male authority in line with postmillennial politics of representation.

Keywords: *Masculinity, American cinema, fatherhood, child, otherness.*

Thanks to its frequent representation, the theme of fatherhood in American cinema has attracted considerable academic attention and has been the subject of several successful analyses. Among the most resonant works that contextualize the father figure within American cinema and history is Stella Bruzzi's *Bringing up Daddy* (2005), a study which examines Hollywood (re)productions of the paternal presence or Hannah Hamad's recent in-depth analysis of the postmillennial American father on screen, *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary U.S. Film: Framing Fatherhood* (2014). Hamad seems to address the debates that have continued over the last two decades with the assertion that the prevalence of the father in American cinema has transformed the figure into a new form of American hero. Furthermore, she also suggests that fatherhood has emerged as a sought-after social position, arguing that "fatherhood has become the dominant paradigm of masculinity across the spectrum of mainstream U.S. cinema" (2014: 1) due to its ability to convey the plurality of male identities through its universal discourse; indeed, it is the universal aspect of the theme which exerts such a powerful appeal among audiences, contributing to the representation of a variety of postfeminist masculinities through the internalization of postmillennial sensibilities (Hammad 2014: 1).

This enduring appeal has inspired a constantly evolving perception of the role of the father in cinema and the model identity has undergone repeated alterations, both in mainstream Hollywood productions and in independent films. Presented across all distribution channels, from mainstream feature films to small-scale productions on streaming services, the character of the father is being brought closer to audiences than ever before. Films such as *C'mon, C'mon* (A24, Mills 2021) which present novel paradigms of contemporary parenting practices that are eagerly adopted by American fathers—no matter how provisional or charming the attempts—are recommended to passengers on long-haul flights by American Airlines regardless of their resolutely offbeat character. The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an explosion in the popularity of streaming sites which have exposed wider audiences to films such as *Palmer* (Apple Production, Stevens 2021) which challenges the persistent pervasiveness of images of heteromascularity, or the Netflix production *News of the World* (Greengrass 2020) which confronts the impossibility of racializing preferred model identities. Similarly, the independent film *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (Nilson and Schwartz 2019) represents an attempt to legitimize authenticity in an effort to connect the father with postmillennial sensibilities. These are just some selected examples of the phenomenon, but they are representative of the

broader trend that I would like to draw attention to in this brief study; more specifically, the persistent attempt to capitalize, if not exploit, the father figure on screen as a means of perpetuating the hegemony of the white, heteronormative American male in American cinema.

Fatherhood, or the focus on the father, is not the only aspect which these films have in common. Another shared characteristic of these films is the different types of fathers which they present with greater or lesser degrees of insistence. Viewers are confronted with initially childless men who, as the story unfolds, undergo the process of becoming fathers on a more or less willing basis. Fatherhood as a status or position is thus not acquired as a result of biological processes but is instead determined and motivated by social circumstances that challenge the protagonists' life situations. These fathers-to-be bond with the children who cross their paths in their journey through life and provoke affective responses which eventually result in their transformation into paternal, father-like figures or legal guardians; they emerge as adoptive fathers who consciously accept the social and financial responsibilities of fatherhood and invest themselves in the new parental role which they have embraced. These protagonists thus step into the role of the father, setting forth into an unknown territory, facing challenges and overcoming hardships, thereby successfully contesting the hegemony of the adult worldview with that of the children who themselves also manage to confront the fathers' own fears and anxieties.

Exploring hitherto unknown social situations involves expectations, making decisions, sometimes an initial reluctance, and a full range of processes generating intense emotions that, due to the father-to-be's ignorance of the scale of the obligations associated with the acquired/adopted child, all of which serves to highlight the naivete of the new father. As Lury explains, fathers-to-be are narratively more precious and appealing because they remain untarnished by the strain of being a parent; untouched by the physical and mental toll it takes to raise a child from the day it is born, these men adjust to the role and perform the process of falling in love with an initially estranged child for the benefit of the audience, gradually bonding and connecting with the child on the axis of desire (2022: 3). This approach offers a much more sympathetic starting point, one that allows for a special relationship to be established and developed based on genuine affection.

This sense of naivete is best demonstrated through the bonding process between Johnny and Jesse in *C'mon C'mon*, where Johnny, Jesse's biological uncle, is asked to look after the child while his mother helps Jesse's birth father to recover from a mental breakdown. As the plot develops, Johnny and Jesse are forced to spend more time together than expected, and the two characters are given the scope to explore each other's worlds and personalities and establish a bond that justifies the uniqueness of their relationship. In addition to Joaquin Phoenix's authentically nonchalant performance, this personal quest into a child's psyche benefits from the film's combination of the fictitious storyline with authentic scenes in which Johnny, a radio journalist, conducts actual interviews with real children to gain their perspectives on their lives, discussing the themes of happiness and respect. These discussions appear more as charming confessions than formal interviews, and the authenticity of the children's recordings complement the film's aim of accentuating the agency of children, acknowledging the authority which children hold in a world otherwise dominated by adult perspectives and validating the unusual degree of narrative attention which Jesse, a child character, receives. In the fictionalized story, the provisional father strives to treat Jesse with the respect which is predominantly granted to adults rather than children, a goal which, the film suggests, is feasible, albeit difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, the film acknowledges that the true originator of this special parent/child relationship established on a bond of partnership

rather than authority is the biological mother, the ultimate guide throughout the bonding process, and this character also takes on the task of providing support and counsel to Johnny over the phone. While admitting that parenthood can be (and often is) a highly challenging task, the motherly contribution remains tangential in terms of the film's narrative, and the focus is placed firmly on Johnny's struggle with his evolving compassion and respect for Jesse. The charming yet bewildered father figure, unaware of the fact that childhood can be "annoyingly material, solid, messy and frequently noisy" (Lury 2022: 5), thus engages the viewer in the development of his special relationship with Jesse to prove that a different model of parenting, one which acknowledges the child's authority and agency, is possible.

A stark contrast to Johnny's attentive connection with a tentative child is offered in the film *Palmer*, in which the titular character, played by Justin Timberlake, not only abides by the white, Anglo/American, heteronormative standard "to which postfeminist fatherhood is predominantly drawn" (Hamad 2014: 137), but also serves as a depiction of performative masculinity. Palmer, an ex-felon newly released from prison, comes into contact with an overtly feminine boy, Sam (played by Allen Ryder). Sam's drug addict mother is incapable of providing a home environment for him, and his happiness eventually comes to depend upon Palmer's ability to accept his otherness. The dichotomy of the representations provides a solid base for the reconciliation of two conflicting types of masculinity. As a former star high school quarterback and an ex-convict, Palmer undergoes a journey of redemption within his former community and reconciles with his past to discover he not only needs to adjust to the post-prison reality but also to adopt a more progressive approach towards what being a boy/man entails. The flamboyantly non-conformist Sam wears dresses and lipstick and adores fairy characters in girls' cartoons, gradually coming to terms with the long absence of a paternal figure in his life. Palmer takes on the alien responsibilities of parenthood with a reluctance that only intensifies with Sam's increasingly open expression of his queer identity. Palmer's motivation to consider the provisional parenting option comes only after the threat of interference by child protective services in the boy's future, with Palmer naturally skeptical of the competence of institutions in his life. Palmer eventually accepts Sam and reconciles not only with his own masculine identity but symbolically accommodates white heteronormative male anxieties through his approach to the child character. Palmer's conscious and active decision to adopt Sam formally only confirms the accomplishment of this symbolic reconciliation.

A similar performative type of masculinity is apparent in the character of Tyler (played by Shia LaBeouf) in *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, one which is perhaps even more intensified by social constraints. Introduced as an unbridled, indifferent "badass" whose only concern is to be left to his own devices and to provide for himself, Tyler finds himself committing to guardianship over a Down syndrome child called Zak (Zack Gottsagen playing himself). Ultimately, it is Zak who determines the nature of their shared journey in which both characters are given the opportunity to reconcile with their pasts and establish a future for themselves. Zak's disability enhances the child-like character of his personality and has a strong rehabilitating effect. Tyler's gradual acceptance of responsibility and his adjustment to the paternal role is effectively defined by his indifference and disregard for social conventions, traits which qualify him to mediate the film's manifest and general advocacy for increased support, respect and authority for the disabled that emerge through the destigmatization of their representation. Tyler's outward treatment of Zak as an individual unmarked by his disability allows the two characters to forge a unique relationship in which they share a general lack of respect for institutionalization, norms and standardization imposed by the social structures

which have stigmatized them both. Tyler's initial reluctance to make friends with Zak is a consequence of his fear of commitment; he has no interest in such bonds due to his irresponsible character and disrespect for authority which is manifested in his criminal past, an aspect of his life which he shares with Palmer. Tyler is also genuinely ignorant of the limitations which Down syndrome imposes upon its sufferers, and Zak's representation is thus largely dependent on the depiction of the conflict that the dichotomy of the social denial/acceptance of Down syndrome engenders. The unique nature of their relationship which, as I have argued in my previously published analysis of *The Peanut Butter Falcon*¹, is purely a narrative vehicle for the realization of the axis of desire; nevertheless, the inherent character of the father/child relationship activates affection and responsibilities that Tyler eventually adopts together with his formal custodianship of Zak.

Child-like otherness is also a determining factor in the father/child relationship depicted in *The News of the World*, a film which historicizes the issue of global conflict on a local/American scale. Centering on the responsibility of a wanderer for an abandoned child, the film's father character is Captain Kidd (Tom Hanks), an archetype of the wandering Western hero; the widower and Civil War veteran lives a solitary and itinerant existence, travelling across the old West to read the news of the world to anyone willing to listen. His bonding process with a child character starts when he agrees to accompany an orphaned German girl and deliver her to her family in Texas. The girl, Johanna (Helena Zengel), had recently been freed from captivity after being kidnapped by Kiowa Native Americans, and her experiences with the tribe are contrasted heavily with the kindness offered by the protective Captain Kidd, with Tom Hank's natural charisma being effectively employed to express and articulate postfeminist sensibilities. Hanks has regularly played father figures in the later stages of his career, and his screen presence is one of the most significant contributions to the melodramatic depiction of the father/child relationship in modern Hollywood cinema. Hank's stardom, his on-screen persona, and his advancing years all contribute to develop an idealization of fatherhood that is expressed by his protective behavior and which is ultimately made manifest in his final declaration to Johanna: "You belong with me" (1.49.20). However, while Kidd originally intends to rescue Johanna from the Kiowa environment to return her to "civilization", the story ultimately plays out differently. After she is rejected and treated as an animal by her family due to her lack of civilized manners, Kidd decides to accept responsibility for Johanna. The girl's otherness is emphasized by her appearance, with her remarkably pale, almost albino complexion and hair symbolically confirming her defective nature, a result of the injuries she suffered during her time with the Kiowas.

Mainstream cinema is predominantly drawn to depictions of this type of paternally signified masculinity that are "affectively charged" (Hamad 2014: 21). However, as Hamad explains, while contemporary popular cinema continues to assert the primacy of postfeminist fatherhood as a new hegemonic masculinity that is founded on a heteronormative, white, Anglo/American-centric template (137), the childlike character which the father figure adopts in these stories becomes a tool for the politics of representation. The otherness is reflected in these films as an inherent attribute of the child, who then becomes the bearer of essential symbolic significance. The child's otherness is revealed through their external features, as in the case of *News of the World*, *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, and *Palmer*, that, according to Olson

¹ *Authenticity in Representations of Down Syndrome in Contemporary Cinema: The "Supercrip" in The Peanut Butter Falcon (2019)*. 2021. In *Ekphrasis : Images, Cinema, Theory, Media*. Vol. 25, Nr. 1. DOI: 10.24193.

(Olson 2015: 87), deprives the childlike character of agency—“a force determined in part by an assumed interiority” (87). In contrast, the performative otherness of the child as is shown in *C'mon C'mon* is much more affecting, often spontaneous and uncontrolled, and thus serves as a far more authentic depiction of childhood, emphasizing that children perceive and interact with the world in a way which is very different from that of adults. The difference in the representation of the otherness of the childlike characters, the presence of the visible, as Olson suggests, not only belittles their actions, gestures and expressions but also denigrates their narrative status when these qualities become less significant than those of the actors whom they appear alongside (87). Films like *Palmer*, *News of the World* and *The Peanut Butter Falcon* center around an acquired father/child relationship, with the narrative objective being to celebrate the father figure who, along with the child, acquires a set of characteristics representative of the new hegemonic masculinity. While *C'mon C'mon* celebrates the role of the father with no less vigor, it does so through the lens of the child, with the relationship between the two protagonists resembling an equal partnership; while Jesse is forced to temporarily adjust to the logistics of his uncle's adult life, Johnny too has to adjust his behavior and understanding of reality without diminishing Jesse's personal authority, with this effort becoming the central narrative motivation of the film.

As the plot of each of these stories develops and as the fathers' initial positions are placed into conflict with the needs of the children, each film makes symbolic use of characters whose otherness is manifested in varying degrees of visibility. The position of the child has long been a subject of interest in a wide range of cinema analyses studying their representation and agency, but more recent research has focused on other aspects of their representation than their symbolism. Traditionally associated with innocence and naivete but also as a symbol of the past, present and future, the dominant image of children in mainstream cinema has reflected the predominance of Western social perspective and demonstrated the paternalistic European culture of the twentieth century with an emphasis on strict parental control, the unquestioned superiority of the adult and justifications for their rational control of the child (Olson 2015: 9). Karen Lury suggests that the contribution of child actors to mainstream Western cinema has traditionally been undervalued; not only is the acting performance of child actors “rarely valued and celebrated as that of white adult performances” (Lury 2022: 86), but more often than not, the visual construction of the child's agency prioritizes the role of the adult character over that of the child. The technique of the close-up plays a crucial role here, allowing the camera to grant a sense of agency to the child on screen, either depicting or ignoring the child's perspective and greatly determining whether or not the audience can relate to or identify with it. These aspects ultimately determine the film's narrative agency, which in the case of the father/child relationship implies the subjectification of the father. And because, as Donnar explains, the position of children in film is commonly overdetermined by the priorities of the adults, this emphasis on qualities and metaphoric meanings associated with exclusively adult anxieties, fears, fantasies, desires and nostalgia are typically combined with children and childhood (Donnar 2015: 188).

The focus on the child in cinema has often been used to reflect sociocultural anxieties and fears through the sensitivity of the child's perspective. The tendency of mainstream cinema to romanticize the experience of childhood has resulted in children on screen being granted the ability to accommodate themselves to changes and incorporate the process of “othering” (Olson 2015: 9). Child characters also serve as useful advocates and bearers of otherness because of the associations that children evoke. As Olson explains, the overly romanticized and idealized representations of children and the prevailing assumption that children are unaware of their

own visible awkwardness (and that of others) means that child characters are often granted such features which both challenge the politics of representation and provoke responses (9). The notion of innocence that protects the child from adult knowledge allows the display of the significance of otherness but the otherness is performed in a dichotomic representation that reinforces white male authority and exposes broader cultural anxieties. The attributes of children that are associated with weakness and the unconditioned relationship they develop with their protectors in these films thus demonstrates what Lury identifies as a racist and anthropocentric worldview (2022: 6).

In prompting an affective relationship with the paternal character, the child enters into the field of political and cultural discourse and elicits their racial (*News of the World*), sexual (*Palmer*) and ableist (*The Peanutbutter Falcon*, *C'Mon C'Mon*) anxieties and preoccupations, but also reveal their hopes. Because the child is an embodiment of joyfulness, life, optimism but also of incredible resilience (Donnar 2015: 188), the children in these films gain experiences that the accompanying adults clearly recognize and ultimately acknowledge. The signification of otherness is granted to children who, as “living representations of human potential” (ibid.), not yet exposed to cultural and social restraints, are accepted as the representation of an ominous possibility for contemporary audiences. In this respect, films like *News of the World*, *Palmer*, *The Peanut Butter Falcon* and *C'mon C'mon* address the racial, gender, sexual and disability politics of representation and align with progressive, countercultural values, but they also parallel the reinforcement of white male authority. As such, the films represent what Hamad refers to as the adaptability of cinematically idealized American masculinity (Hamad 2014: 91). In certain cases, the heteronormative white fathers are challenged by the otherness of the child to demonstrate a masculine retreatism that evinces the anxieties arising from the reformulation of gendered social roles which occurs through adjusting to the parental position that requires “men’s performance of women’s work at a supposed cost to the legibility of the place of heteronormative white masculinity” (93). Child characters and their perceived need for protection thus legitimize paternal and patriarchal authority. And if, as Hamad suggests, fatherhood enables the internalization of postmillennial sensibilities (2014:12–17), the effect appears to be the ultimate reinvigoration of the family. These films contribute to the formation of a romanticized notion of fatherhood by presenting American men who knowingly adopt the role of the father but who also remain unaffected by the physical and mental strain involved in the task of raising a child. And if they don’t know what the hell to do with the child at the beginning of the story, they certainly come to find out by the end of the film.

Notes

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