

Conflict and Wilderness (A Film Essay on Escape and Fate)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

Film narratives set in a so-called wilderness often represent the exit from a habitual setting with characters embarking on a more perilous, arduous, isolated and divided new path towards a particular far-off goal. In four films of different genres from the United States, Denmark and Turkey, we will examine how narratives related to urban exodus, fantasy quest, triggering isolation and opposed realms, affect the lives—and choices—of the key characters within them.

In Alfonso Cuarón's film adaptation of P.D. James' Children of Men (1), we are taken to Britain in 2027, a decaying battleground state where car bombs and gunfire are commonplace, where immigrants are constantly rounded up and put into stark refugee detainment areas and where—much like other parts of the world—schools and playgrounds are vacant due to near total and complete human infertility. When Theo is rudely reacquainted with his ex-wife Julian—the leader of an militant activist group—he meets young expectant mother Kee and embarks on an exodus mission from Britain's urban wilderness and its omnipresent violence to protect and guide her (along with her precious human cargo) towards the top-secret Human Project and the possibility of reversing humankind's mass extinction.

In Jim Henson and Frank Oz's The Dark Crystal (2), Gelfling Jen is summoned by the Master of the peaceful Mystics to embark on a quest to heal the cracked crystal as foretold by a prophecy, in order to reverse the cruel impending rule of the Skeksis. On the long and precarious journey through wilderness with often bizarre and unfamiliar fauna and flora, Jen meets another Gelfling named Kira—who was raised by Podlings after being separated from her kind—and they must work together with a cast of friendly puppet creations to evade the powerful Garthim and introduce the crystal shard into the Skeksis-controlled crystal chamber at precisely the moment when The Great Conjunction unfolds with the alignment of the suns.

In Lars von Trier's explicitly violent psychological horror film Antichrist (3), we are introduced to an unnamed couple as they struggle with grief and denial following their young son Nic's tragic death. After opting to handle the grieving process without pills and psychiatric follow-up, the couple's marriage progressively deteriorates as they isolate themselves in their lonely family cabin in the woods, where rustic therapy sessions led by the husband fail to address the wife's escalating mental health concerns which eventually lead the vilomahs into a reckless and violent show-down set in a wilderness of triggering memories past.

In Ceylan's acclaimed film Winter Sleep (4) set in Central Anatolia (Turkey), retired actor Aydin tries his hand at writing as he co-manages his family's hotel business with the slow winter season approaching. While Aydin basks in the lavish and privileged Cappadocia mountaintop setting of his family resort with his sister and young wife Nihal, he also rules over a squalid peasant class of tenants that rent flats from him

in the impoverished muddy foothills below. While the landscape that Aydin possesses through the fancy vistas of his tourist resort are both idyllic and even fancifully domesticated, the alternate view of the mountains taken in by the toiling peasant underclass is a world of harsh weather, exhausting commutes and frustrating social inequality.

While the wilderness in the studied films below represents a transitional state—where characters are forced to face or understand certain hardships to share a path toward human salvation, peaceful order, recovery from grief and societal equality—not all of these narratives result in an end to conflict or toil. In some cases, an imbalance and a division persists at the film's conclusion based on the complexities of human nature and a fated and flawed social order.

Sources:

1. Children of Men (2006). Dir. Alfonso Cuarón. Universal Pictures. USA. 109 min.
2. The Dark Crystal (1982). Dir. Jim Henson and Frank Oz. Universal Pictures. USA. 93 min.
3. Antichrist (2009). Dir. Lars von Trier. Nordisk Film Distribution. Denmark. 108 min.
4. Winter Sleep (2014). Dir. Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Pinema. Turkey. 196 min.