

Mountain Men: An Analysis of the Modern Day Mountain Man

Communication 470 – Cultural Theory

Prof. Housel

April 16, 2010

Mike Goris

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the appeal of the notorious Mountain Man. Such a figure seems to draw in the attention of both genders. Men want to be them and women find themselves attracted to them. These people represent the image of adventure, courage, and pure masculinity. I will look at where the image originated and why it continues to be popular among audiences. I also wish to probe shows such as *Survivorman* and *Man vs. Wild* to determine which demographics demonstrate the greatest affinity. I also plan to analyze whether or not this image of a masculine Mountain Man has an affect on social expectations of men, perhaps increasing the want or need to be more masculine. To begin, we must discover the original image of a “Mountain Man”.

In the 19th century exploration of the Western frontier soared. Men with a taste for adventure began roaming the Rocky Mountain region, in doing so profiting from the bounty of their adventures. The fur trade began booming in 1822 when, “William Ashley and Andre Henry formed a partnership to acquire beaver skins for the top hats that were increasingly popular in Europe” (Belk and Costa 220) and life for these men was difficult. A Mountain Man in the 19th century lived in the wild for weeks on end and many died due to starvation, dehydration and the natural elements, but those that survived were viewed as legendary and indestructible.

While such a living seems adventurous and amazing, a stigma was place on men within the fur trading industry. Mountain Men were considered “wild, uncivilized, and as fleeing civilization and domesticity” (Belk and Costa 221) and thus creating the image of

Program: School of Journalism and Communication-Communication and Society

the rebel in American culture. They were looked as such because “rebels threaten the status quo and challenge societal institutions” (Holt and Thompson 428). This stigma had much to do with their life style and the lack of interaction with whites; these men interacted more with the indigenous Native American tribes. “The lack of white women and the expedience of fostering better relationships with native tribes led many mountain men to marry Indian women” which was extremely taboo and not a common occurrence in white society (Belk and Costa 221). Mountain Men in the Rockies during the 19th century did what they wanted, when they wanted, where ever they wanted, and there were no societal restraints to stop them. These men were the rebels of their time.

Another stereotype that emerged was the Mountain Man, the perfect hero. Heroic stories of braving the wilderness established this purely masculine stereotype such examples including, “Hugh’s Glass’s tortured hundred-mile crawl after being mauled by a grizzly bear” (Belk and Costa 221). Mountain Men were thought of as the “fearless adventurer...wandering over a vast unknown wilderness, succeed[ing] at length in conquering a hostile land” (Carter and Spencer 17). They were men with gusto and they were “individuals with vision, guts, and a can-do spirit” (Holt and Thompson 428) who attempted to conquer an unknown land and build a new market from the ground up. In today’s society, such attributes are considered characteristics of real men both by society and the media. Strong and able to face anything whether it be bears or a storm, Mountain Men were “constantly exposed to all kinds of perils...callous to any feeling of danger and [destroying]...animal life with as little feeling as they expose[d] on their own...Their wish is their law and to attain it” (Carter and Spencer 21). They had no boundaries and

Program: School of Journalism and Communication-Communication and Society

thus were considered almost invincible in the eyes of some. It was this invincibility and the stories that accompanied the existence of these men that their image “became famous because they enacted a mythic masculinity in which men relied upon their individual cunning, determination, and brute strength not only to survive nature but to conquer it” (Holt and Thompson 427).

The Mountain Man was not only a hero but also a capitalist. His purpose was to make profit off a trade that many men would not dare to enter. In Carter’s and Spencer’s article they discuss Goetzmann’s theory that “the mountain man [was] a hard-driving, ambitious person, eager to improve his status in society by the acquisition of wealth, which he felt could most readily be gained by taking advantage of the opportunities existent on the frontier.” The exploration of the Western frontier left men who traveled there with a sense of “boundless opportunity, [and] free[dom] from social barriers” (Holt and Thompson 427). The fur traders out west began to create business on their terms and in the process created a profitable market of their own. They were reinventing the new frontier and unbeknownst to them creating their own corporate environment between the indigenous peoples and other fur traders alike. In their minds “one bec[a]me a man through the act of achieving – through the tenacious work required to climb the socioeconomic ladder to a position of status” (Holt and Thompson 427).

Although these men were indeed intelligent there was a backlash due to their life style. In many ways this type of man was more of a mythical figure rather than a historical one. In his article *The Mountain Man as a Jacksonian Man*, Goetzmann states that, “the Mountain Man figure exists as a figure of American mythology rather than

Program: School of Journalism and Communication-Communication and Society

history. From the first he has been the very symbol for the romantic banditti of the forest, freed of the artificial restrictions of civilization – a picturesque wanderer in the wilderness whose very life is a constant and direct association with nature” (402). The Mountain Man was not only a mythical figure because of the romanticism that followed close behind or the stigma of rebellion but because all of these stereotypes contradicted each other in various ways. A rebel could not be a capitalist, and the hero could not be either or, and thus it was up to the individual to construct their image of the Mountain Man based on the stories which were told to them by others.

By the mid to late-1800s Mountain Men began to disappear with the decline of the fur trade, leaving only the memories of their image throughout the years following. In today’s modern society the image of the Mountain Man still persists but in a more romanticized and controlled manner. Production and film companies have used this image to its fullest attempting to gain primarily male based audiences, by creating the image of full blown masculine Mountain Men as their central characters. Belk and Costa state on page 220 that “[it is] important to consider the historical, folkloric and mass-mediated representations of historic mountain men that provide the raw materials for contemporary fantasy construction. Such constructed images of mountain men began to be shaped with the original mountain men were still active.” It was these constructions that slowly affected and changed the way these men were viewed within American civilized society. These perceptions have obviously changed to now fit the societal norms of the modern age.

Program: School of Journalism and Communication-Communication and Society

In the 21st century we have taken this image and created shows such as *Man vs. Wild* and *Survivorman*, which is what we now call Tough Guy TV. These programs are full of testosterone driven males with a need for adventure and it is this drive that draws in audience attention. They are the modern day Robin Hoods, and they represent what Mountain Men in the 19th century used to represent, freedom from civilization and extreme adventure through our television screens. Male models and actors are continuously modeled “after cowboys of the wild west, mountain men, and various other premodern figures who are imagined to live free of societal authority and can be understood as rebelling against the constraints and conformist pressures of modern life” (Holt and Thompson 436) in male based media. The main objective that must be taken into consideration is whom are the networks creating the image and what message are they trying to portray to target audience members, which we will discuss further later on in the thesis.

These shows have not only recreated a new sense of masculinity but have reignited the want for a truly masculine image within the media. This want has arisen because the majority of men have lost some of their identity and because women make up the majority of the viewing population. Target audiences are primarily comprised of females and there is more media content for women than there is for men. Because of such factors it seems that many men in today’s society can only identify themselves through their work. In Holt and Thompson’s article they claim that

“Major socioeconomic changes have threatened the masculine identities of many men. Jobs in certain industry sectors have become more routinized and less

Program: School of Journalism and Communication-Communication and Society

secure, while, at the same time, women have gained more independence as they have entered the work force. Men who have suffered pangs of emasculation in this new environment have sought to symbolically reaffirm their status as real men through compensatory consumption” (425)

both material and media wise. Not only that but men have become much more feminized within the media and that has more than likely created a disconnection with male audience members. Thom Beers, who helped create a variety of tough guy shows such as *Deadliest Catch* states that, ““most men go to jobs with no joy or passion. More and more, men want to be men”” (qtd in Strauss). These shows provide an escape for these men and “there are enough tough guys to live through vicariously on TV” (Strauss).

Because the purpose of this is project was to analyze media based texts, I decided to do a textual analysis of the episodes from both *Man vs. Wild* and *Survivorman* that I acquired fro the actual research process. A textual analysis is a way of analyzing data by looking at the meanings behind the text or artifact, this being the main character, to try and understand why people are drawn to these shows, and to the notorious image of the mountain man. One must first describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate the text studied, which in this case are the show hosts; Bear Grylls and Les Stroud. These episodes provide a visual image and embody what the mainstream media is portraying as masculinity and the skills and characteristics that true men should have.

Both men have had very strong running seasons and in order to analyze the true image of each; the first three episodes from season one of each series will be examined. At such a stage in development, the show will be a hit or a flop, as time goes by

Program: School of Journalism and Communication-Communication and Society

producers and directors alter the shows to keep the attention of the target audience and objectives are changed along the way, including how the main character is perceived.

This will be an examination of the initial intent of each program.

Mans vs. Wild focuses on the host Bear Grylls, whose main objective is to be able to find his way back to civilization from a stranded and remote location. Left alone, only his camera crew whom he is not allowed to interact with unless he is in immediate danger, he begins his trek. Grylls is a white male who is 36 years of age, with dark hair and in great physical condition. He happens to be a rather good-looking man as well. He is clothes in all three episodes in cargo pants, rainproof jacket, giving him a rather rugged look. The introduction of his show talks about his adventurous accomplishments, which lets the audience know that he is qualified to be hosting such a show. He also does all of the narration for the show.

Survivorman has a similar objective, though no quite the same as *Man vs. Wild*. The purpose is for Les Stroud to survive for seven days in a remote location until someone comes to find him or until he reaches civilization. The main difference between this and the other Tough Guy show is that Les Stroud has no camera crew for the majority of his trip. He and he alone is in control of documenting all of his movements. He is not as attractive as Grylls but is in good physical condition and has a satirical wit about him along with a nonchalance attitude about his current situation, which draws in audiences.

Each show had their differences; the characters themselves had a lot of similarities. The clothing worn was similar, their confidence was both strong and they

Program: School of Journalism and Communication-Communication and Society

seemed sure at what they were doing. Both men were also very crafty, MacGyveresque. They made rafts, shelters, and fires from all of the natural resources around them. They caught animals and ate insects for nourishment, something that most people in civilized American society would never do. They also used similar vocabulary and the words dangerous, careful, and safety were used repetitively, speaking to the audience. Both hosts also included stories of hikers that had gotten lost or experiences some kind of distress while out in the environment of that specific episode. Also anytime that the host became sick, injured, or close to danger they did not express fear or pain, just fatigue. Although there is a lack of emotion from both hosts, they are very charismatic individuals. Their personalities draw you in and keep you interested and they know how to keep you on the edge of your seat. Also at no point in time does either man mention women or anything remotely feminine. This is unadulterated masculine environment dirt, grime and all. These similarities help comprise what we know as the modern day Mountain Man and also what we expect from our male population.

Including the creation of such an image are the ideologies that are subconsciously relayed within the content. These very ideals are the socially constructed messages and portrayals of what masculinity should look and be like according to the media. Both shows represent specific ideologies found within American society. An ideology according to Bennet is an “unconscious system of beliefs belonging to any particular class or social group” (176). Ideologies can and do change. There is always a constant power struggle and when groups in power change, ideologies more often than not change with them. The primary example that can be discussed in this thesis is the shift of

Program: School of Journalism and Communication-Communication and Society

perceptions about the Mountain Man. In the early 19th century the vast majority of society looked down on the hunters and fur traders out west, but as time passed they became legendary and eventually the idols of young boys and men alike. Society became more demanding of men, and women began moving up in the world. Soon many males felt burdened and chained to their industrial jobs and their suburban homes wishing to be like those men in the past. This is exemplary of the fluidity of societal constructions in relation to gender and how ideologies can drastically change with the passing of time.

The first and most obvious ideology found in these shows is that of masculinity. These men are strong, courageous, and adventurous. They are able to survive on the bare minimum and still live. As Carter and Spencer state in their article, “their sole care is to procure sufficient food to support life, and the necessary clothing to protect them from the rigorous climate” (21). These portrayals definitely affect the mindset of audience members on what is true masculinity. In American society patriarchy has always been a predominant ideology. Men were the primary breadwinners and also the figures having the main sources of power, but with the rise of feminism at the turn of the century they slowly began to loose that hold on society. In an article by Rob Owen Discovery Channel President John Ford is quoted as saying “ ‘I think ‘tough guy TV’ is, to some degree, a little bit of a rebellion against the feminization of leading men...It’s not to turn back the clock on gender relations, but rather to vicariously enjoy something that is of male province.’” But what these male audience members don’t realize is that these positions are socially constructed. In *Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements* by Michael A. Messner he claims that “mythopoetic men tend to treat ‘gender, masculinity,

Program: School of Journalism and Communication-Communication and Society

and the category ‘men’ as if they were primitive constituent elements of the universe’ rather than social construction” (18). These men vicariously live through these characters because they cannot do so themselves. They have to fulfill various roles in their everyday lives and at the same time maintain the masculine image that society has placed upon their shoulders. This specific ideology “blends together two seemingly competing models [breadwinners and mountain men]: one emphasizing respectability, organized achievement, and civic virtues, and the other emphasizing rebellion, untamed potency, and self reliance” (27). Although they are contradicting ideas this is what society expects from its men.

There is also the ideology of race involved. First off both men were Caucasians who held successful careers. They were very intelligent and able to survive in the wild without dying some horrible death. Why is this? Since the establishment of the United States race has been a dividing factor and till this day we can see that race plays a huge role in mass media. The ideal choice for a host on a tough guy show is the average white male, who can survive in the wild, or be able to handle the danger involved in such a profession. There is no diversity and this is unnerving although people do not realize it. In an article by Matthew Henry he discusses the difficulties associated with black masculinity, and yes there is a difference. While white masculinity is associated with intelligence and overall power, black masculinity is associated with violence, brute force and being highly sexual. Henry states that “black masculinity has developed largely as a result of the com-modification of hip-hop culture and the ubiquity of rap music and the ‘video commercials’ that sell” (116). This also helped create an emphasis on the sexuality

Program: School of Journalism and Communication-Communication and Society

of the black male. Henry goes on to say that “[black] masculinity is thus clearly defined by sexual prowess and male conquest” (116). The image of a black man would not appeal to the audiences that watch such shows as *Man vs. Wild* and *Survivorman*. Not just because of skin color but also because the majority of Americans have associated negative connotations with black men in general. In Herman Gray’s article *Black Masculinity and Visual culture* he states that, “[the] figure of black masculinity consistently appears in the popular imagination as the logical and legitimate object of surveillance and policing, containment and punishment” (402).

The final ideology is the construction of masculinity through the mass media. I stated earlier in my paper that the modern day image of a Mountain Man was a powerful yet controlled man. There is a dichotomy that is created within the image of the Mountain Man himself. Both Bear Grylls and Les Stroud are the physical embodiment of not only hard workers and having superior work ethic but in the process exemplifying freedom from society and its restraints. What this means is that this image is clearly constructed and created by producers, directors, and networks that we get our information from. As mentioned before these conflicting ideas are created and embedded into our media networks and fed to us through subliminal and sometimes very outright messages. To better understand this phenomenon it would make sense to discuss the networks that have popularized the Mountain Man Tough Guy image. There are three main networks that currently have taken hold of this genre; Discovery Channel, National Geographic and History Channel. What is interesting about them is that they are all viewed as educational and scientific networks. And not only that but National Geographic’s “gender

Program: School of Journalism and Communication-Communication and Society

associations are masculine, both because of its content (adventure, science) and its cultural power and position” (Lutz and Collins 8). Right from the start these companies are made to attract primarily white male audience members and they continue to use adventure and science for that exact purpose. These people know that men who watch their programs rely on the “masculine figures championed in films, television, books, sports, music, and the news ...as semiotic raw ingredients that [they]...draw upon to construct their identities” (Holt and Thompson 427).

Although such networks provide a variety of shows that are meant to open a window to another world and to help expose us to other cultures what is actually presented is a polished image. As quoted in Bennett “there is no such thing as ‘unmediated’ communication” (214). The image of the Mountain Man is constructed to attract the attention of males and it is evident by the content within these shows that that is the case, but that content is constructed in a specific way. This image is an object to gain their attention and as Berger states in chapter three, “objects function as signs and generate meanings to others...Nothing has meaning in itself; an object’s meaning always services from the network or relations in which it is embedded” (45). With having to create the Mountain Man, these companies must also uphold their image as well as protect their viewers from the uncouth things in our world such as extreme poverty and violence. Lutz and Collins declare, “The National Geographic has presented a world that is predominantly middle class in which there is neither much poverty nor great wealth. It is a world comfortable to contemplate” (103). This is extremely relevant to the Mountain Man because neither Grylls nor Stroud ever parish in their adventures. As a matter of

fact, they make it out alive every time, which is something that is not very realistic if one of those scenarios were to actually occur to an average man in society.

After analyzing these ideologies it raises the question of why are these specific networks the ones milking the modern day Mountain Man role and reinventing masculinity? Profit. This is why the majority of our media contains “stories of supremely confident men who pay no mind to industry conventions, invent a new way of doing things, and struggl[ing] tenaciously against seemingly insurmountable forces” (Holt and Thompson 428). These stories are meant to draw you in. Although these companies want you to think that their main purpose is to educate you and make you more knowledgeable of the world around you (which I am sure is part of their intention) they are part of a capitalist society where money runs everything. Without money they cannot be productive and they cannot bring in revenue so numbers and audience ratings count for a lot. They need to be able to create shows that keep attention spans long enough to last for more than three seasons, or companies begin to lose lots of money.

I believe that people forget that although these companies provide interesting shows and information, it all has some kind of constructed image, which they want the audience absorb unknowingly. The networks mentioned above are notorious for creating another window into exploring the world. They provide a new perspective that allows people at home to experience what is out there through their television screens. But what many audience members do not pick up on is that everything shown on these channels has a bias or a specific image that the network wants to uphold. Without realizing it they are feeding into these constructed ideologies. They believe that yes they are gaining

Program: School of Journalism and Communication-Communication and Society

information of the outside world and they are being educated on what is out there, without thinking about the main objectives of these companies; money. These networks design their shows to bring in more numbers, and make profit and the only way to do that is to create shows that have a major wow factor, which is exactly what these new “Tough Guy” television shows have.

Since the establishment of these networks certain ideologies have reigned true and have not experienced significant change. The Mountain Man image has managed to be a bigger success than previously thought and networks gurus will continue developing that image until they cannot take it any further. It is an attempt at masculine revival in a world where women are slowly beginning to dominate society and where men do not know how to identify with other men outside their everyday jobs. Not only do they still feel the need to be the sole breadwinner but they must also portray the perfect images of father, brother, husband, son, co worker in accordance to society’s standards. Men are slowly being suffocated by women and feminism and Tough Guy TV is an outlet for them to reconnect with their masculinity in the comfort of their own home whether they realize it or not. It is true that these shows provide a way of escape and a way of reestablishing their manhood vicariously through the dashing British man by the name of Bear Grylls on *Man vs. Wild*. Or watching how to make a fire out of two sticks and some grass through the skills of Les Stroud. Either way hosts such as Grylls and Stroud are the Mountain Men of our day and “novelists, filmmakers, television producers and have added their own interpretations of the mountain man lifestyle...embrac[ing] and nourish[ing] variants of the American frontier mystique” (Belk and Costa 221). These are the people who keep

the image of the historic and mythical Mountain Man alive and thriving within society and within the hearts of all Tough Guy TV viewers. Men look up to them and wonder what it would be like to walk a day in their shoes. As minute as it may seem this is a way for men to reconnect with their masculinity. In the same instant these characters (because that is what they are) are also creating unattainable standards that the average Joe may never be able to reach or accomplish. These constructions of what men should be are created by both the media and by our society. Men need to remember as do the rest of viewing audiences that the current Mountain Man is only a fantasy of what a real man should be, not what he can be.

Works Cited

Belk, Russell W., and Janeen A. Costa. "The Mountain Man Myth: A Contemporary Consuming Fantasy." *The Journal of Consumer Research* 25.3 (Dec. 1988): 218-40. *Jstor*. Web. 5 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2489832>>.

Bennett, Tony, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, eds. *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. Print.

Berger, Arthur A. *What Objects Mean: An Introduction to Material Culture*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast, 2009. Print.

Carter, Harvey L., and Marcia C. Spencer. "Stereotypes of the Mountain Man." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 6.1 (Jan. 1975): 17-32. *Jstor*. Web. 4 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/966964>>.

Goetzmann, William H. "the Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man." *American Quarterly* 15.3 (Autumn 1963): 402-15. *Jstor*. Web. 5 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711371>>.

Gray, Herman. "Black Masculinity and Visual Culture." *Callaloo* 18.2 (Spring 1995): 401-5. *Jstor*. Web. 10 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299086>>

Henry, Matthew. "He Is a Bad Mother *S%@!/: Shaft and Contemporary Black Masculinity." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 30.2 (Summer 2002): 114-19. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 1 Apr. 2010.

Program: School of Journalism and Communication-Communication and Society

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=6989481&site=e=ehost-live>>.

Holt, Douglas B., and Craig J. Thompson. "Man-of-Action Heroes: The Pursuit of Heroic Masculinity in Everyday Consumption". *Journal of Consumer Research* 31.2

(September 2004): 425-40. *Google Scholar*. Web. 15 Oct. 2010.

<www.csulb.edu/~pamela/read397/Man_of_Action_Heroes_JCR.pdf>.

Lutz, Catherine A., and Jane L. Collins. *Reading National Geographic*. Chicago:

University of Chicago, 1993. Print.

"Man vs. Wild: Bear Grylls: Discovery Channel." *Discovery Channel: Science, History,*

Space, Tech, Sharks, News. Discovery Communications LLC. Web. 10 Apr. 2010.

<<http://dsc.discovery.com/fansites/manvswild/manvswild.html>>.

Messner, Michael A. *Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements*. London: Sage

Publications. Print.

"Survivorman Official Website." *Les Stroud*. Survivorman Productions. Web. 5 Apr.

2010. <<http://lesstroud.ca/survivorman/episodes.php>>.