

# FORUM

University of Edinburgh  
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts  
Issue 16 | Spring 2013

<b>Title</b>	Wilderness, the West and the Myth of the Frontier in Sean Penn's <i>Into the Wild</i>
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<b>Publication</b>	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
<b>Issue Number</b>	16
<b>Issue Date</b>	Spring 2013
<b>Publication Date</b>	05/06/2013
<b>Editors</b>	Laura Chapot & Lizzie Stewart

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## Wilderness, the West and the Myth of the Frontier in Sean Penn's *Into the Wild*

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*This article investigates the representation of wilderness in Sean Penn's Into the Wild, specifically with regards to the myth of the American frontier. By using the myth of the frontier as a structure through which to read the film, we discover that the film proves William Cronon's thesis that the idea of wilderness as an anti-human place is merely a human construct.*

### Introduction

Sean Penn's *Into the Wild* was released in 2007 to widespread critical acclaim, with some describing it as "spellbinding" (Ebert) while others claimed that "it deserves to be one of the most talked about films of the season" (LaSalle). Based on the novel of Jon Krakauer, which in turn is based on a real life story, the film depicts the quest of college graduate Chris McCandless to escape from what he sees as the deceit ridden fabric of modern consumerist capitalist society into the freedom and the vast open spaces of the wild.<sup>1</sup>

As the title of the film indicates, one of its major preoccupations is the representation of wilderness and, beyond this, the meaning of wilderness in modern culture and society. William Cronon, in "The Trouble with Wilderness" (1995), makes what was seen as, at the time, "a very controversial attack" on the overly romanticised view of Nature held in the West and particularly in America (Clark 234).<sup>2</sup> Cronon, Professor of History, Geography and Environmental Studies and specialist in American environmental history and the history of the American West, claims that "for many Americans, wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilisation, that all too human disease, has not infected the Earth" (69). Cronon goes on, however, to highlight that this view of wilderness as an escape from human civilisation is highly ironic, given the fact that "far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation"(69). In summary, Cronon claims that, in modern society, wilderness has come to embody a space that is anti-human but, in fact, wilderness is such a human construct that true wilderness in the sense of being completely other to the human, does not actually exist. Therefore, the contemporary Western relationship with wilderness cannot be perceived to be as "natural" as we might assume.

In this essay, I intend to argue that Chris McCandless, the protagonist of *Into the Wild*, views wilderness in exactly the way that is condemned by Cronon. He thinks of it as a completely nonhuman place where he will be able to leave the falsity of human civilisation behind and at last discover "truth" (although he is always very vague as to what this truth might be). Chris' highly romanticised and

idealised view of nature becomes apparent very quickly in the film. At the basis of Chris' romantic perceptions of nature, we find the same two ideas that Cronon also claims are at the core of the wilderness' sudden transformation at the end of the nineteenth century from being a place of barren wasteland to the desirable destination that it is today – the myth of the frontier and the idea of the sublime.

Although we can use both these ideas as structures through which to read the film, this essay will focus on the myth of the frontier due to the fact that *Into the Wild* can be considered a type of Western, a genre to which the representation of the frontier is crucial. By using the myth of the frontier as a structure through which to read the film, I intend to prove that, ironically, Chris' romanticised view of nature has been formed by the very society which he himself rejects and furthermore that he brings some of this civilisation into the wilderness with him, illustrating Cronon's thesis that wilderness as an anti-human place cannot exist.

### **The Significance of the Frontier in American History**

In venturing into the wild, Chris is following in the footsteps of his ancestors who set out, hundreds of years ago, as pioneers to discover the unknown lands of the Wild West beyond the frontier. Fredrick J. Turner, in his seminal essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), was the first to posit the theory that, rather than the relationship to colonial European powers, it was the American frontier that had the most significant formative influence not only on American history, but also on American character and culture. He argued that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development" (3). Turner ends by claiming that, even by 1893, the geographical place of the frontier "has gone and with its going has closed the first period of American history" (38). This end, however, is also a beginning – Turner lays the foundations for the myth of the frontier which will come to have a pervasive influence on American culture and society, as evidenced in literature and film by the rise of the Western genre.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, many of what will come to be the key aspects of the frontier myth, dealt with in the Western genre, are already evident in Turner's essay. He defines the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilisation" (2). Thus, as we witness, for example, in many Western films, it is a landscape of violence, "a place to express conquest and domination" (Schneekloth 210). Yet, paradoxically, seen through the eyes of the agrarian ideal, the frontier, as Turner emphasises throughout his essay, is also a place of "perennial rebirth" providing rejuvenation of both man and society (2), as well as a "new field of opportunity" for the rebirth of civilisation and society that will never come again (28). Believing to such an extent in the frontier's capacity for renewal, Turner even goes so far as to describe the frontier as a "magic fountain of youth" (qtd. in Nash Smith 5).<sup>4</sup>

### **The Frontier Myth in *Into the Wild***

This is precisely the aspect of the American frontier that is mythologised in *Into the Wild*. It is the potential for rebirth and renewal provided by the frontier and what lies beyond, that really captures Chris' imagination. This is evoked in the film by Chris' rebirth as Alexander Supertramp and we are constantly reminded of this by the naming of the "chapters" the film is divided into: these progress from "My Own Birth" through to the "Getting of Wisdom." Indeed, Penn deliberately associates this sense of rebirth and renewal with the myth of the frontier itself. In one of the opening scenes, when Chris is dropped off by the truck driver at the end of the Stampede Trail, the edge of the Alaskan wilderness, the way the camera is angled gives us a very high and wide bird's eye view of the desolate and seemingly virgin wilderness into which Chris is about to set off, so much so that at first we do not even notice the approach of the van in one small corner of the screen. It is completely overpowered by the vast and immense landscape surrounding it. Even when the dialogue begins it is still the view of the landscape which dominates our attention, we do not even see the people who are talking. We are then presented with an overhead view of a tiny figure making fresh footprints in the otherwise untouched snow, signifying that this land into which he is about to venture is unknown and undiscovered. The edge of the Stampede trail, the climax of Chris' journey of self discovery, is thus represented as a frontier beyond which the lands remain to be discovered.

This idea is also emphasised throughout the sequence of the opening credits as we are presented with a montage of Chris journeying into the wilderness. The camera pans across the enormous, snow covered mountains, pausing to give us a shot of Chris' face for the first time as he struggles through the snow, with no other sign of humanity in sight except the knitted hat that Chris places on a stick in a similar gesture to mountaineers who place a flag at the top of the mountain. The bright orange hat stands in great visual contrast to the snowy plains surrounding it and emphasises the lack of any other sign of civilisation by its stark and anomalous appearance.

With the appearance of Chris' words "I now walk into the wild" superimposed on the screen, the camera begins zooming out to show how vast, unforgiving and uninhabited this landscape appears. Chris is thus cast as a pioneer, about to embark on an adventure never before attempted. This cinematic technique is repeated at the start of the chapter noticeably entitled "My Own Birth." Just after we have been shown Chris throwing off the ties and constraints of modern civilisation by cutting up his identification cards and giving away his money in order to allow for his rebirth as Alexander Supertramp, we are again presented with a high overhead shot, this time of him in his car driving into the desert, representing what he sees as his escape from society. Chris then simultaneously vocalises this escape and explicitly invokes the myth of the frontier by saying:

It should not be denied that being footloose has always exhilarated us. It is associated in our minds with escape. History and oppression are gone and irksome obligations. The absolute freedom of the road has always led west. (*Into the Wild*)

Thus, with this statement, Chris not only inescapably references the frontier myth but makes it clear that his mythologisation of it specifically relates to the West as a place of liberation and self discovery. This, however, also presents us with a problem. Writing almost a century after Turner, Richard Slotkin, highlights the significance of the role of violence in the frontier myth to a far greater extent and brings the two opposing aspects of the myth together by claiming that this regeneration that Turner also speaks of was in fact achieved “through violence” (12 original emphasis). Hence we realise that by only viewing the frontier and the wilderness that lies beyond it as a place of escape from society, and failing to acknowledge the violence that Slotkin claims must go hand in hand with this, Chris holds a romanticised and unrealistic point of view about what he expects to discover beyond the frontier.

We see this unrealistic perspective, for example, in his ecstatic statement to his friend Wayne: “I’m going to Alaska, I’m gonna be all the way out there on my own – no fucking watch, no map, no axe, no nothing, just be out there in it, big mountains, river, sky, in the wild – in the wild!” (*Into the Wild*). Noticeably throughout this conversation, Chris and Wayne are never shown in the same shot. The camera mostly focuses on Chris’ face, alight with passion and excitement, but occasionally switches to Wayne, whose expression is one of scepticism, mirroring the fact that one of the biggest criticisms which can be made of Chris by an audience is that he was severely underprepared for his journey and can therefore be seen as having a suicide wish. Ironically had he brought a map with him, it might have saved his life. However, clearly Chris believes that if he were to bring such tools of civilisation with him he would not be able to experience wilderness as an anti-human place.

Indeed in the very next sentence Chris goes on to say that when he is in the wilderness he will be “just living, just there in that moment, in that special place in time” (*Into the Wild*). What is significant here is Chris’ mention of “that special place in time” because this is how wilderness, thanks to the frontier myth, is often falsely viewed. It is seen as being somewhere where all the past of human existence is miraculously erased and it thus becomes, to use the words of Cronon, “a flight from history” (79). William Talbot, in his 1969 essay “American Visions of Wilderness”, claims that in nineteenth-century America it came to be believed that “the past of the wilderness stretched back to creation itself, untouched by human civilization. This virgin nature was as close as man could ever hope to get to the primal state of the world” (152). This advocacy of primitivism, the belief that the ills of our modern society can only be escaped by returning to a more simplistic way of living, is an opinion endorsed by Chris. However, as Cronon is quick to point out, this is, and never has been, true of the lands beyond the frontier which were inhabited by the Native Americans before the Native Americans were forced out in order to maintain the myth of the virgin wilderness (79). In fact this irony only highlights how constructed the idea of wilderness has become. Furthermore, as we have already noted, in the opening scenes of the film, the frontier for Chris is shown to be the extreme North of America and not, in fact, the West. This is precisely because, as Turner highlights, the frontier of the West no longer exists – now it is only in Alaska where virgin wilderness can be found and this is why Alaska holds such an allure for Chris. The properties of the mythic West have been displaced to the North. Therefore, Chris is shown not only to be ignoring the violent aspect of the

frontier myth but also to be buying into this myth of virgin wilderness which is irrevocably intertwined with the renewal qualities of the myth of the frontier.

*Into the Wild* has been recognised as including many elements of a more typical Western film, one of these key elements being a setting at the frontier and a representation of the frontier myth. Cronlund Anderson, in *Cowboy Imperialism*, argues that, in fact, without a representation of the frontier myth a Western film is not a Western (16). As such, the Western film itself, as a genre, is structured by the same series of oppositions which the frontier myth encompasses – the individual versus the community, nature versus civilisation and the West versus the East.<sup>5</sup> In *Into the Wild* we can see these binaries present not only in Chris' own beliefs but also in the way the film is structured. As Chris journeys North, Penn makes frequent use of flashbacks in order to contrast his past with his present. For example, as we see Chris renaming himself Alexander Supertramp and subsequently walking off towards the horizon, symbolising the beginning of his adventure, this image is pushed to the left hand side of the screen in order to allow for the simultaneous viewing of the lives of his parents who we see worrying about the whereabouts of their son. This splitting of the screen is a visual representation of the fact that Chris' past is being contrasted with his present, as well as his new found individualism contrasted against the community he has left behind, and civilisation against the wilderness he is now living in. The voiceovers by Chris' sister Carine also have this function – she acts as a voice from the past but a past which Chris has consciously severed himself from and is now placing himself in opposition to. Thus through its very structure the film is aligning itself with the Western film tradition specifically in regards to the dichotomies raised by the myth of the frontier.

We could see Chris himself, however, as a kind of Western anti-hero. The typical hero of a Western film is the cowboy. Despite the fact that Chris does share some traits in common with the stereotypical cowboy, represented by a picture of Clint Eastwood on Chris' wardrobe door, such as courage and skill, he is also very different from them mainly because although, like Chris, cowboys often acted alone, their actions were usually seen to be for the good of a community, as they sought to bring civilisation into the wilderness.<sup>6</sup> Not only, however, does Chris act completely for himself but he deliberately seeks the primitive state of living that the wilderness can provide precisely because it is in complete opposition to civilisation, thus leading us to view him as an anti-hero.

The question, then, is raised as to whether Chris manages to avoid tainting the wilderness he enters with traces of civilisation. We must remember that the very idea of the frontier itself is a human creation, as Schneekloth tells us, "it was invented, not discovered" (210). Therefore, we could see Chris' conception of wilderness as a piece of civilisation he brings with him into the Alaskan wildness. The myth of the frontier as a place of rejuvenation is central to his conception of wilderness, an idea which comes from the very society he seeks to leave behind. This view of wilderness as a piece of civilisation comes to be visually and concretely represented in the symbol of the "magic bus," the abandoned camper van where he lives while in Alaska. Chris calls the bus "magic" precisely because it contains enough of the vestiges of civilisation to fulfil his basic needs and allow him to live out his

fantasy of complete self-sufficiency in the Alaskan wilderness but not so much that he feels that he is no longer a pioneer.

Another concrete piece of civilisation that Chris brings with him into the wilderness is his collection of books. Jonah Raskin criticises the film for “not being able to free itself from the written word” (4), but this is precisely because Chris himself is never freed from the written word. Throughout the film, we constantly see Chris reading the works of Thoreau, London, Tolstoy and Pasternak, from all of whom he learns important ideals which he applies to his own life, whether it is while he is sitting alone in the magic bus or perched upon a rock overlooking the sea and the ocean.<sup>7</sup> We are shown early on in the film Chris’ capacity to take what he reads and apply it to his own life. When he and Carine are arriving at Chris’ graduation dinner, Chris reads out some poetry to Carine, who asks him “Who wrote that?” to which Chris replies “Well, could have been either one of us, couldn’t it?” (*Into the Wild*). Thus, we see that, for Chris, there does not necessarily have to be a clear distinction between fiction and real life.

Although books and reading abound in the film, the works of one writer in particular are important – those of Henry David Thoreau. It is from Thoreau that Chris borrows the idea that then forms his central philosophy on life: “rather than love or money or fame or fairness, give me truth” (*Into the Wild*). Thoreau’s *Walden, or Life in the Woods* is the only work of environmental literary non-fiction to be considered part of the Western literary canon (Clark 27). Throughout *Walden*, but particularly in the section entitled “Solitude”, we hear Thoreau express many sentiments that, as evidenced by references to the book throughout the film, Chris seems to have absorbed in his reading of it. For example, Thoreau speaks of the delight of having “a little world all to myself” and constantly expounds upon the innocence and benevolence of nature (98). When speaking of the one moment in his experience when he felt himself to be a little lonely, he goes on to say:

In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. (99)

Chris too believes that the society he will find in nature will be far superior and less corrupt than the human society he has chosen to leave behind. But most importantly of all, in the society of nature he will find truth where there is none to be found in civilisation.

When Chris first arrives in the magic bus, he tells us that now comes, “after two years, the final and greatest adventure – the climactic battle to kill the false being within victoriously concludes the spiritual revolution” (*Into the Wild*). Chris believes that this “false being within” has been created by civilisation and only in the Alaskan wilderness is it possible to destroy it because first isolated surroundings must be found where nothing can contaminate the inner spirit. While Chris is speaking,

the image of him carving these words into the wood is interspersed with images of him chasing deer in the snow and watching them with tears welling in his eyes. Finally, he thinks that he has returned to “the truth of his existence” and has escaped from everything that kept this truth from him, as his sister tells us, once Chris has graduated:

Now he was emancipated from that world of abstraction, false security, parents, materiality, the things that cut Chris off from the truth of his existence. (*Into the Wild*)

Thus the frontier between the Alaskan Wilderness and the rest of the world becomes for Chris a boundary, a kind of dividing line, between truth and falsehood and reality and abstraction. He creates a dichotomy in his mind where everything good is ascribed to nature and everything else to humanity and the two are clearly distinct from one another. It is therefore more than a little ironic that Chris believes the “truth of his existence” is to be found in the wilderness, which he thinks has a radical alterity to humanity, when this very idea of what this truth is has been formed by words and books coming from the civilisation he so despises.

Significantly, not only is Chris constantly reading but he also writes a journal and tells his friend Wayne “maybe when I get back, I can write a book about my travels” (*Into the Wild*). Furthermore, when Chris speaks of his “spiritual revolution” he is writing the words at the same time and we witness him creating a narrative for himself as he carves painstakingly into the wood, emphasising the act of creation, while simultaneously reading aloud “no longer to be poisoned by civilisation, he flees and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild” (*Into the Wild*). The way the camera jerkily moves across the words as Chris carves them mirrors the act of reading, jumping from one word to another. This is a highly conscious deployment by Chris of the same types of narratives he has read by Jack London, for example, and suggests that in the narrative of his own story he is consciously representing himself as a heroic cowboy figure. This is emphasised by the fact that Chris chooses to write in the third person: by so doing he is distancing himself from his own story and writing about himself as though he were a character in one of his favourite novels.

In *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton says, in reference to Thoreau, that “a white male nature writer in the wilderness may be “going native” to some extent, but he is also usefully distancing this wilderness, even from himself, even in his own act of narration” (126). We might modify Morton’s words slightly by saying that by the very act of narration the wilderness is being distanced because it starts to become something that is being written about and that has happened in the past rather than that is being experienced in the moment. Moreover it becomes subjected to the laws of storytelling and the control of the narrator. Therefore, just as the frontier has become a myth because it began to be written about, encoded with certain signs and symbols, the same thing happens to wilderness. By turning his wilderness experience into a narrative, Chris seems ultimately to be proving Cronon’s point, that the wilderness can never truly be an anti-human place because the wilderness is not allowed merely to exist, or even, to be enjoyed by humanity but is subjected to the narratorial authority of those who inhabit it.

In addition, Chris tells Wayne that, if he writes a book, it will specifically be about “getting out of this sick society” (*Into the Wild*). This is ironic because to write a book for others to read is to take part in the consumerist nature of capitalist society and by so doing, Chris would be allowing the account of his experiences to forever become trapped within, and perhaps be exploited by, the very society he escaped from. Although not written by Chris himself,<sup>8</sup> a book was indeed written about the experiences the real Christopher McCandless had in escaping from this “sick society”. On a metatextual level, we are made aware throughout the film that what we are watching is indeed a story that has already been told and is subject to the narratorial whims of the director. Several times, for example, Emile Hirsch, as Chris McCandless, looks straight into the camera with an extra-diegetic gaze that is aware of the audience, reminding us not only that we are watching a man made film but that it has been constructed especially for our enjoyment and entertainment. These moments are also “intended to invoke the movie’s final shot”, a picture of the real Chris McCandless sitting outside the magic bus, smiling happily (LaSalle). This closing image reminds the audience just how distanced we are, first by Krakauer’s book, then by the film, from the “real” story as it actually happened and just how much narrative control it has been subjected to in the meantime. Therefore, not only are we shown that the wilderness itself is merely a construct but also that any attempt to relate a story about it inevitably involves enmeshing it even further in various human constructs, of which the myth of the frontier is only one.

## Notes

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1. Throughout this essay, when I refer to *Into the Wild*, I am always referring to Penn’s film unless otherwise stated. It is also worth noting that when I refer to Chris McCandless, I am always referring to the character portrayed in the film and not the character of Krakauer’s novel nor the real life person. This essay focuses on the film as opposed to the book because it is through Penn’s film that the story of Chris McCandless has become well known. Furthermore, Penn makes more of a conscious effort than Krakauer to highlight the film’s links to the Western genre and thus the myth of the frontier takes on more importance in the film.

2. Despite Cronon’s assertion that his claim was “heretical”, it was both later and previously supported by many others. See, for example, J. Callicott, Kate Soper and Carolyn Merchant (although Merchant differs from Cronon in that she believes it is the myth of the garden of Eden that lies at the basis of our modern perception of wilderness rather than the myth of the frontier).

3. Much has been written about the influence, and presence, of the frontier myth in American literature and culture. For the impact of the Frontier myth on literature, see, for example, Bakker and McVeigh. For the influence of the frontier on American culture and politics, see Slotkin.

4. Nash Smith is quoting a speech delivered by Turner in 1896 of which I have been unable to find the original version.

5. For the full, more detailed table of oppositions see Kitses (12).

6. For more about the civilisation process of the lands of the frontier brought about by cowboys see Calder (5).

7. See Raskin for a discussion of the film’s intertextuality in relation to the works of Jack London. Issues of intertextuality are fairly prominent in the film, and would be interesting to investigate further, however, they fall outwith the scope of this essay.

8. Krakauer does, however, make extensive use of Chris’ journals in his book and has done extensive research on the journey that he took, even taking the same journey that he does.

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