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Environmentalism in Film

Film Critique: Into the [Human Constructed] Wild

Into the Wild (2007) is the filmic adaptation of Jon Krakauer's novel which depicts the true story of Christopher McCandless—a young man who left civilization, family, friends, and all his worldly possessions behind in order to pursue his idea of true happiness amongst the Alaskan wilderness. Having both read the novel and watched the movie, I strongly feel that *Into the Wild*, while aesthetically breathtaking, is a nature fantasy at best, and not a true piece of environmental cinema. There are many elements of the film that can be interpreted as an adventure story, and embody the classic “return to nature” theme. However, Chris McCandless' story is ultimately problematic, and highly dangerous approach to connecting to nature. To elaborate, it is likely that Chris' decision to abandon society, and the infamy that his story has received can be attributed to two factors. First, the romanticization of the natural world as an untouched place of refuge from modern life, and an escape from human anxiety with industrialization, has long been a widespread and attractive notion. Secondly, the fascination with expanding upon the “frontier,” and longing for “simpler times,” is deeply embedded into American consciousness. The conflation of these two elements creates an attitude towards nature that is constructed for human-interest, and does not reflect the realities of nature. For Chris McCandless, his perceived notions about the natural world and motivations for entering it were ultimately self-serving, and failed to consider the unrelenting force of nature; an oversight that ultimately proved to be fatal.

The film is presented in a nonlinear narrative, cutting back and forth between McCandless' time spent in the Alaskan wilderness and his two-year travels leading up to his journey to Alaska. The first scene begins with Chris arriving in a remote part of Alaska, and trekking off into the snowy wilderness with limited supplies, books, and a .22 caliber rifle to hunt for his food. The frame cuts to two years prior, to May of 1990, where Chris graduates from Emory University. It becomes clear that Chris has a strained relationship with his family, particularly with his parents. When they offer to purchase him a new car, he views the action as wasteful. In this moment, we begin to get a glimpse of Chris' anti-materialist attitude. Shortly after this, Chris destroys all of his IDs, credit cards, and donates his entire savings to charity. He makes the decision to leave everything behind, and sets out to drive cross country, without notifying friends or family. During a flash flood in Arizona, Chris is forced to abandon his car and continue his travels by hitchhiking. At this point in his travels, Chris burns what remains of his cash and assumes a new identity of "Alexander Supertramp." Chris, or "Älex" forms relationships with several people on the road, often staying for weeks or months at a time. He forms a friendship with a hippie couple in Northern California who begin to think of him like a son. They often question him about his parents, imploring Chris to contact them to ease their likely worries regarding his whereabouts.

Traveling to South Dakota, Chris begins to work for a contract harvesting company owned by Wayne Westerberg. Chris' naïve perception of society and the environment is fully realized by the viewer during a bar scene with Wayne, who is portrayed by actor Vince Vaughn. While Chris is describing his plan to live in Alaska, it becomes clear how half-hatched his plans really are. He asks Wayne about books on smoking and preserving meat, clearly having little to no experience with the task himself. This causes the viewer to question his preparedness and

knowledge of truly living off the land. He summarizes his desire to be out in the “wild,” as being “out there in it...mountains, rivers, skies, game...in the wild,” a description of nature that is feeble and romanticized at best. At this point it becomes painfully clear that the movie is not a piece of environmentalism at play, but rather a coming of age story gone wrong. While the film is split into various ‘chapters’ representing McCandless’ “rebirth” upon setting out on his adventures, through his adolescence and eventually his coming to wisdom, this structure feels highly inaccurate and misrepresentative. Rather than a story of a man’s coming to self-actualization and truth, *Into the Wild* is really the disillusioned fantasy story of a restless youth. There is little wisdom in McCandless’ statements, which are often quotes from Thoreau, Tolstoy or Jack London that he is merely repeating. When Wayne questions Chris at the bar, the best he can do is to drunkenly chant ‘society, society’ over and over again. He is unable to articulate more of these concerns to Wayne, and merely manages to point to “parents, hypocrites, politicians and pricks,” as the source of society’s sickness. While McCandless’ frustrated feelings with capitalism and materialism were perfectly valid, he was simply too young and inexperienced to properly give voice to those concerns, and rather than face them, he opted to run away from the problems of the modern world.

Chris eventually makes his camp in an abandoned bus in the Alaskan wilderness, but soon life becomes harder, and he finds it difficult to sustain himself. As his supplies begin to run out, he becomes aware of the gravity of his situation and the indifference the natural world has for him. It is during this realization that McCandless decides to return to civilization. However, while heading back, he comes across a wide, deep, and violent river which had originally been a small stream during his initial crossing. It is at this point that Chris becomes trapped in the wilderness. He is unable to hunt, withering away as the weeks go on. Desperate and starving,

Chris collects roots, seeds, and berries confusing an edible plant with a poisonous one. Slowly dying, Chris comes to the realization that “happiness can only be real when shared.” In this moment, the film utilizes a cutting or montage technique, during which Chris reflects on his life. Imagining his friends and family one last time, Chris dies in his sleeping bag. Two weeks later, his body is found by hunters.

To understand Chris’ frame of mind upon adventuring into the wild, it is important to analyze Chris’ particular fascination with the great authors such as Emerson, Leo Tolstoy, Jack London, and in particular Henry David Thoreau. As an author of great influence in Chris’ life, Thoreau’s thoughts about nature and society played a great role in shaping Chris’ own philosophy. Like Chris, Thoreau’s life was also characterized by a desire to return to nature’s simplicity. This desire is documented in his famous work *Walden* and also happened to be one of the books Chris carried with him into the Alaskan wilderness. Fans of Thoreau often look at his famous work, *Walden* as a sort of environmental code of ethics, or a way in which humanity can thrive in the nature world, while still treating nature with respect. In the beginning of *Walden*, Thoreau critiques what he believes to be the major problems in society. He argues that man is too consumed with material possessions and tiring labor in order to purchase these possessions. He believes that these things offer nothing substantial yet people assume that they need to acquire more and more, which drives them to devote all their time to labor. Thoreau argues that this comes at the cost of one’s inner freedom and happiness, that “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” For Thoreau, modern capitalist society is an oppressive prison of sorts.

In a more extreme take on this line of thinking, Chris rejects American materialism when he burns all of his money, donates his savings to charity, abandons his car in the desert, and completely cuts ties with his parents/family to rebuild a simple life free of material possessions

in the Alaskan bush. For Chris, as with many Americans before and after him, the wilderness served as a place of refuge. As William Cronan states in his article, *The Trouble with Wilderness*, “wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth. It is an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity, the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness. Seen in this way, wilderness presents itself as the best antidote to our human selves.” Although well intentioned, the problem with this logic is that it is ultimately driven by human needs and human experiences. Chris’ decision to go into the wilderness and live with nature is motivated by his anxieties with modern society, and mirroring the actions of Thoreau in Walden Pond, he flees. The desire to run from civilized society life speaks to an old mistaken belief that humans once lived in harmony with the natural world, or as Chris states in the film, a “special place in time.” This moment that Chris is imagining, in which humans and the environment were always in balance, always in harmony, is a fallacy that imagines a perfect, pastoral, past nature. This way of thinking about past natures is highly nostalgic and creates a longing to reconnect or “go back” to a time of simplicity in the wild.

The film follows much of the same locations and sights that the real-life Christopher McCandles would have seen. Its filled with sweeping, panoramic shots of the North American landscape. We see the ancient old growth of the Pacific Northwest, the canyons and deserts of the south, the wheat fields of the plains areas and finally Alaska, the final destination that Chris speaks of with a kind of mystical fascination and awe. In order to understand Chris’ obsession with the Alaskan wilderness, it is important to address the historical roots of the American mentality. In this matter, while director Sean Penn tells Chris’ story with respect and aesthetic beauty, he fails to root it in any American historical context or investigate its cultural constructed

complexities. To understand Chris' motivations, one must remember that the structure of American society today is the direct result of a long history of expansion into the West. The early settlers pushed through the land, conquering native territories, drastically changing the natural landscape, and all with the righteous justification of Manifest Destiny and pursuing the American dream. Today's America rests on that foundation, and has become a culture of materialism and consumerism, yet is also one that often looks back at the old west with a sense of nostalgia for the pre-industrialized life of the new frontier. The failure of the film to address this aspect of Chris' mentality is a significant one. While Chris, and many other wanderers like him, found frustration with his society and the current state of the world, he was nevertheless a direct product of that culture. In this historical context, it is no surprise that McCandless was obsessed with Alaska. Dubbed as America's "last frontier," it has captured the imaginations of travelers, intellectuals, and romantics who have longed for simplified life since the onset of the Industrial Revolution.

While it is perfectly normal to indulge in the fantasy of the romanticized wild in literature or film, there is also a danger in this line of thinking. Chris McCandless' ultimately lost his life due to a mistaken understanding of the natural environment, and a misplaced desire to remove himself from society. Although meaningfully intentioned, he walked into the wild with a kind of human arrogance and superiority over nature, much like the frontiers before him, failing to consider the reality of his environment and his position within it. His desire to live completely removed from society and off of the land, was a completely unsustainable. Following in the pastoral mode of Thoreau and other romantics, Chris' return to the wild can be thought of as catering to human wants and desires, and makes no attempt at environmental problem solving. It is highly problematic in that it ignores the human problem of environmental degradation and

does not take any measures to show how we can combat the issue, merely avoid it. Viewers of the film might be inspired to pick up a copy of Krakauer's book, or have a transformational experience in "nature" for themselves. However, what the film ought to do is make a greater statement about how we can change the society that Chris and his role models were so frustrated with. Escaping into the wild and cutting ties with society is wholly unproductive, and will not stop the continued degradation of the Earth's environment, the continued industrial expansion, population explosion or issues of pollution. At best, one might hope that the film would inspire some challenge to create a sustainable lifestyle more integrated with nature, but sadly it does not make this environmental call to action.