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## Crossing to the Imaginary: *Bildungsroman* and a Journey *Into the Wild*

Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice.

Michel de Certeau

In 1990, twenty-two-year-old Christopher McCandless left his comfortable upper-middle class suburban lifestyle in Annandale, Virginia on a two-year journey that would eventually lead to his death in an isolated and abandoned bus in the Alaskan wilderness. McCandless was clearly and intentionally rejecting the society to which he belonged on the one hand, while on the other he was choosing the wilderness as a place of refuge. Early in his stay on the bus, McCandless wrote a “declaration” on a “sheet of weathered plywood” stating that he was “An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road . . . No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild” (Krakauer 163).

The story became widely known after the publication of Jon Krakauer’s article about McCandless’ journey in *Outside Magazine* in 1993, and even more so after his bestselling book *Into the Wild*. However, it was only after the book was turned into a highly-regarded film of the same name, written and directed by Sean Penn in 2007, that the story achieved wide-scale recognition and popularity. One of the reasons for the film’s considerable success is its romantic, youthful defiance to what may be perceived as the smothering nature of an inhumane capitalist society and the possibilities of escapism from the constraints of civilization into the innocence of wilderness. A. O. Scott of the New York Times wrote that the film “is infused with an expansive, almost giddy sense of possibility, and it communicates a pure, unaffected delight in open spaces, fresh air and bright sunshine,” that the book and film “persuasively place him in a largely apolitical, homegrown tradition of radical, romantic individualism” that reflects an “Emersonian dimension,” and that its essence “arises from a passionate, generous impulse that is as hard to resist as the call of the open road.” The story as such has been praised for its subversion by some while being condemned for its naiveté by others. In this essay we would like to consider these readings by analyzing the different and often contradictory forces at play in the life of McCandless as represented in the film.

We frame this filmic critique by emphasizing the journey and life-changes of McCandless within the literary genre of *Bildungsroman*. In essence, we study his journey as a coming-of-age experience that can be simultaneously framed within the psychological shifts of the protagonist and her/his movements across space and through places. At the same time, and in its simplest form, *Into the Wild* is a “road movie” (Cohan and Hark) in which the protagonist has changes of mind, heart, and visions of the world as s/he traverses the landscape. We propose that an integration of the journey within the frame of *Bildungsroman* allows for a particularly rich interrogation of the story, and from this perspective we come to the conclusion that Penn’s final section, not found in the book, attempts to complete the personal and spatial journey of life change for McCandless by creating a vision of his return home, whereupon he continues his life, with elements of personal growth as part of his history. We conclude that this brief statement undermines the purportedly subversive nature of the film, in which a dominant social and cultural ideology is being challenged.

Our article is located within the tradition of cinematic geography, and as such is informed by and contributes to this research direction. The origins of the subfield can be traced to the 1950s, although “it is only since the 1990s . . . that sufficient quantities of critically engaged research articles and books on this popular medium have been produced to allow for a disciplinary subfield to emerge” (Dixon 40). Several contributions during this period have attempted to define and frame cinematic geography,<sup>1</sup> but the subfield is still far from realizing an overarching framework.

Mobility is a common and integrative theme often found within cinematic geography, and it is used here to help contextualize the nature of the journey that lies at the heart of the narrative of *Into the Wild*. The consideration of mobility in film begins with an emphasis of movement within space as constructed for the screen, which “is, after all, a particular kind of movement, the movement of the image created by the movement of frames in front of a light, which separated the new art form from its more static predecessors” (Aitken and Dixon 332). Indeed, it is the movement in space of the image and within the image that gives cinema its unique power, but despite the fact that “film is a visual representation of a mobile world” (Cresswell and Dixon 4), the literal study of mobility as narrative has not been systematically examined. In response, this essay is a cinematic geography of mobility as it is manifest in a story of journey and self.

This movement narrative can be found in several cinematic geographies, including McHugh’s non-performative interpretation of *The Straight Story*, which he says “offers dramatic illustration of the entanglement of movement, memory, and landscape” (209); Aitken and Zonn’s essay (“Weir(d) Sex”) that includes a gendered focus on two young soldiers traveling to Gallipoli for war; and Zonn and Winchell’s description of the travels of two young American Indian men from the reservation and back in order

<sup>1</sup> See Aitken; Aitken and Dixon; Aitken and Zonn, “Representing”; Clarke; Crang; Cresswell and Dixon; Dixon; Dixon and Zonn; Doel and Clarke; Kennedy and Lukinbeal.

to gather the ashes of one of their fathers. These studies explore film, people, and their movements, while implicitly centering on the framing of changes in self-identity that accompany the journey through space. A more explicit concern with this latter notion can be found in Aitken and Lukinbeal, which uses *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *Paris, Texas*, and *My Own Private Idaho* to “suggest that the vehicle as a rationalized panoptic cell and the road as a linear vanishing point provide spatial metaphors for the journey that constructs a political identity of maleness” (357).

### *Bildungsroman* and the Journey

The journey of Christopher McCandless, studied here as a film text, can be critiqued within the literary genre of *Bildungsroman*. The subject of *Bildungsroman*, also called novel of emergence, novel of formation, or sometimes coming-of-age novel, considers “the development of the protagonist’s mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences—and often through a spiritual crisis—into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one’s identity and role in the world” (Abrams 193). This is essentially the process of enculturation, “by which culture is learned and transmitted across generations” (Kottak 14). McCandless sets off on a journey that is supposed to shape him as an educated, socially integrated, and middle-class American who has become an adult. It may be argued that he is too old to be a protagonist of such a novel, but as Millard points out, “The term also carries an imprecision and a cultural relativity that needs to be taken into account. When exactly does a character come of age, and what specific experiences are deemed to be relevant to it?” (4). Jeffers paraphrases Buckley’s outline of a typical *Bildungsroman* plot:

A sensitive child grows up in the provinces, where his lively imagination is frustrated by his neighbors’—and often by his family’s—social prejudices and intellectual obtuseness. School and private reading stimulate his hopes for a different life away from home, and so he goes to the metropolis, where his transformative education begins. He has at least two love affairs, one good and one bad, which help him revalue his values. He makes some accommodation, as citizen and worker, with the industrial urban world, and after a time he perhaps revisits his old home to show folks how much he has grown. No single *Bildungsroman* will have all these elements, Buckley says, but none can ignore more than two or three. (52)

As a popular literary genre, *Bildungsroman* played an important role in nineteenth-century society. The novel in general “has been particularly sensitive to the diverse ways in which individuals come to terms with the governing patterns of culture . . . novels in effect thematize their own place in culture, for works of art are themselves educational tools. They do not merely passively reflect the prevailing ratio of mobility and constraint; they help to shape, articulate, and reproduce it through their own improvisatory intelligence” (Greenblatt 15). Literature can be construed as a hegemonic insti-

tution (in the Althusserian sense; Althusser) and as such may play a crucial role in the formation of society's norms and values. In support of this structure and at the center of *Bildungsroman* is the belief that "the self would grow up only at the moment it came to terms with the demands of other people—with the exigencies of marriage, of vocation, and of socioeconomic realities" (Jeffers 39). As Raymond Williams has claimed:

[M]ost writing, in any period, including our own, is a form of contribution to the effective dominant culture. Indeed many of the specific qualities of literature—its capacity to embody and enact and perform certain meanings and values, or to create in single particular ways what would be otherwise merely general truths—enable it to fulfill this effective function with great power. To literature, of course, we must add the visual arts and music, and in our own society the powerful arts of film and of broadcasting. ("Base and Superstructure" 27)

Film, as perhaps the most important medium of popular culture, has taken over the novel's function in shaping the social and cultural values of its audience. It is precisely through such popular texts, which "embody and enact and perform certain meanings and values," that our perception of the world is formed. This point owes much to Derrida's "view that we can have no access to reality that is not mediated by language, no glimpse of history that is not refracted through representation" (Ryan 3). The narrative of *Into the Wild* is based on a reconstruction of a real chain of events. That fact is supposed to lend credence to the narrative, claiming it is not fiction, but rather a real story transposed from reality into a book and finally into a film. Realistic representation, however, is not to be taken for granted, because it is only "an aesthetic tool that tries to make a narrative more real to the viewer" and "attempts to hide its mode of production" (Lukinbeal 16). The fact that it is based on a true story only serves to "naturalize" the ideological foundation of the film, to make us believe that, in this particular instance, reel is indeed real. We as audience, therefore, more easily identify "not only with specific characters but more importantly with the film's overall ideology" (Sturken and Cartwright 73). Since its invention, the camera has been perceived as "a scientific tool for registering reality" (Sturken and Cartwright 17), so it is not surprising that film, as a popular narrative form, has been appropriated by the dominant culture for the purpose of social and cultural incorporation (in Williams's sense). Rather than simply portraying reality, "images interpellate or hail us as viewers, and in doing so designate the kind of viewer they intend us to be" (Sturken and Cartwright 52). *Into the Wild*, as a mainstream cultural product, will of necessity advocate precisely those mainstream values that it seemingly subverts.

The life trajectory of McCandless as represented in the film can be described within the framework of *Bildungsroman*, although there are some obvious and fundamental differences when compared to the traditional model. He does not go to the metropolis, but instead travels the country and eventually ends up in one of the most remote places in the United States that is in every respect antithetical to the

metropolis. One possible reason for this crucial difference is that in many European countries—and *Bildungsroman* is, after all, originally a Western European genre—national culture was defined by reference to a high-class urban tradition, while American national mythology very often drew upon a Frontier trope, often based on the experience of overcoming the challenges of nature. What is significant in either case is that formal school education as such is deemed insufficient for the complete formation of a person's character. In the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, "This kind of novel of emergence typically depicts the world and life as experience, as a school, through which every person must pass and derive one and the same result: one becomes more sober, experiencing some degree of resignation" (22). It is not surprising, therefore, that a young American should feel the need to experience nature, ultimately ending up in Alaska, a place that is "considered one of the world's only remaining wilderness areas" (Kollin 42).

We should note that the *Bildungsroman* literary genre has long been gendered by being male in presumptions, structure, and use, although more recent and certainly insightful studies of female contextualizations are increasingly found in literary critiques, as with the interesting studies of Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston by Feng and of Margaret Atwood by McWilliams. Exploring this literature and context would be of considerable value to a fuller understanding of this genre, most immediately within the frames of space, place, and mobility, but such an effort is well beyond the scope of this study. Our critique of the film *Into the Wild*, then, must remain an examination of the evolution of the nature of a young man within the more standard features of *Bildungsroman*.

The relationship between McCandless and his parents, especially his father, is shown to be intensely contentious, and the family history includes domestic violence and other forms of bullying, and he considered everything his parents had told him to be "calculated lies masking an ugly truth" (Penn 00:52:52-00:52:56). Such "absconded or absconding parents" (Jeffers 17) are found in almost every *Bildungsroman*, whether in a real or figurative sense. It is also the "impulse toward self-determination that . . . prompts a youth at some point to resist his parents, especially his father" (Jeffers 13). For a male protagonist, the relationship with his father is often crucial. As Millard points out:

An important issue in the coming-of-age novel is the way in which finding a place in society is coterminous with finding a satisfactory relationship with the father. For the young male protagonist especially, the relation to the father is a vital means to socialisation, and he is often the principal figure through whom the codes of society are learned. Coming of age is thus a drama of coming to terms with the father, and with all the social and cultural governance for which he stands. (15)

Finally, traveling is crucial to the genre of *Bildungsroman*. A young person—often an apprentice who has finished a formal education and is now ready to start living as

an adult—leaves the family nest and goes into the world, where s/he gains the necessary experience and knowledge to become a successful and functioning member of society. The very fact that McCandless chose to travel “into the wild” is understandable with respect to the peculiarities of American culture on the one hand, but on the other it clearly represents a rebellion against society and its notions of “normal” life. Trying to experience nature is perfectly fine; indeed, it is at the core of the national ideology, but it is acceptable only if it is done in socially acceptable ways, which are essentially conservative, that is, the traveler must minimize the amount of risk and ensure that the s/he is going to return to “normal” life, to a socially defined position, while his (or less likely, her) youthful adventure soon becomes just a story about the folly of youth. So even though wilderness is a salient theme in American culture as a part of the Frontier trope, in reality it belongs in the past. It is respected only in relation to the formative period of American culture, while nowadays it can only be ritualized in benign forms—e.g., camping, hiking, etc. On the other hand, if a person refuses to conform to social pressures and tries to escape, to go beyond the scope of dominant ideology, s/he becomes a threat to society. McCandless apparently went to the extreme by often taking unnecessary risks, including going ill-prepared to Alaska, which in itself seems subversive enough.

### A Journey *Into the Wild*

The introduction of the film *Into the Wild* prefaces the five chapters that frame the story of the journey of Christopher McCandless by establishing background details of his life and by giving the viewer the first glimpses of his Alaskan destination. He is shown being dropped off at the end of a road by the last person to see him alive, and as he trudges through the knee-high snow, and as he wanders away, the opening credits roll. Taken from his journal, across the screen are the words “I now walk into the wild,” which is followed by spectacular shots of the remote Alaskan countryside. It is April of 1992. He eventually finds an old abandoned bus on a rise—with “Fairbanks City Transit System” emblazoned on the side—and with apparent excitement, he writes in his journal “Magic Bus day.” The bus will become his home for the next 113 days and is the place where he dies.

The screen then turns back to the end of his college days, with “Emory Graduation: Two Years before Magic Bus” presented on the screen. A celebratory restaurant scene in Atlanta begins, with his sister, mother, and father, and here the viewer is given an example of McCandless’s ideology of life when compared to his parents’ views. They offer him a new car to replace his old one, and words are exchanged, with him saying, “I don’t want a new car. I don’t want anything.” Soon after, he is seen alone, sending his remaining college savings to a charity and then destroying his credit cards, driver’s license, social security card, and quite powerfully, a photograph of his parents. He is about to begin his journey (00:03:05-00:21:30).

*Into the Wild* tells two parallel and linear tales: McCandless’s journey from Atlanta to Alaska over the course of two years, and his mental and physical changes at the

Magic Bus over the course of nearly four months, from his arrival to his death. The camera changes—usually abruptly but nearly always effectively—from the progression of one part of his life to another. On a few occasions, the story shifts to a part of his life with his sister (Carine McCandless) and family, usually accompanied by the sister's voiceover. The heart of the film is comprised of five chapters, each introduced by a title across the screen that describes a life phase. Each chapter begins with a transition as he leaves one place and continues his journey to another. Although the introduction of the film sets the stage in terms of his background and general state of mind, the journey of his life—his *Bildungsroman*—doesn't begin until the moment he is literally on his own.

Chapter 1, "My Own Birth," begins with a shot of McCandless driving away from Atlanta. His parents and sister in Virginia do not know he has left. His voiceover says, "It should not be denied that being footloose has always exhilarated us. It is associated in our minds with escape from history and oppression and law and irksome obligations. Absolute freedom. And the road has always led west" (00:22:14-00:22:35). Soon afterward, his car gets stuck in a flash flood in an arroyo in Arizona. He seems unperturbed, takes off the license plates, and then burns his money, all in a symbolic purging of the last of his material possessions. He is seen hitchhiking and is eventually picked up by a man and woman in their early forties who drive a "hippie van." The couple begins to develop a close relationship with him, and at one point the woman says, "Where are your mom and dad?" to which McCandless responds, "Living their lies somewhere" (00:29:30-00:29:40).

Chapter 2, "Adolescence," begins after McCandless leaves the couple. He is shown walking, hitching, and resting within a variety of usually picturesque rural landscapes, and eventually stops in South Dakota, where he works on a farm and begins a close friendship with Wayne. It is to Wayne that McCandless first expresses his desire to go to Alaska: "I'm gonna be all the way out there . . . You know, no fucking watch, no map, no axe, no nothing. No nothing. Just be out there. Just be out there in it. You know, big mountains, rivers, sky, game. Just be out there in it, you know? In the wild. Just wild!" (00:46:10-00:46:35). But it is winter in Alaska, so his travels then take him to the American Southwest, where he experiences a series of adventures.

During these travel sequences, the sister's voiceover describes his trip to California the summer after high school, when he discovers family stories and lies that came as a shock to him and his sister, including the fact that when Alex and his sister were born, their father had been married to another woman, and yet their own mother was aware of this relationship. In essence, they had another family in California. The siblings were devastated, and the viewer is reminded of the dysfunctional family that is a part of his being.

Chapter 3, "Manhood," follows McCandless through yet more travels in the Southwest, which are interspersed with scenes from Alaska ("Magic Bus Week 7") that show his increasingly futile attempts to feed himself, and his inexorable physical decline. Flashbacks and the sister's voiceover during this chapter describe the domestic violence that occurred during their childhood, only adding to the image of the fam-

ily's dysfunction, but she continues as in a letter to him saying their parents have been changing since he left, "Even their faces had changed. . . people soften by the forced reflection that comes with loss" (01:22:30-01:23:50).

In chapter 4, "Family," McCandless returns to California to visit with the couple he had met in chapter 1. He enjoys his time here, becoming yet closer to the couple, while befriending a young woman of 16 who is clearly enamored with him. At one point, the older woman painfully speaks of her son, who she hasn't heard from in two years, whereupon she holds Alex's face with her hand, and says quietly, "Do your folks know where you are?" (01:38:16). Her anguish is palpable.

McCandless leaves, and the camera returns to Alaska; he has clearly declined physically, while his exuberance in earlier segments seems to be missing. He is reading Tolstoy's "Family Happiness," and reads aloud,

I have lived through much, and now I think I have found what is needed for happiness. A quiet secluded life in the country, with the possibility of being useful to people to whom it is easy to do good, and who are not accustomed to have it done to them; then work which one hopes may be of some use; then rest, nature, books, music, love for one's neighbor—such is my idea of happiness. And then, on top of all that, you for a mate, and children, perhaps—what more can the heart of a man desire? (01:46:35-01:47:28)

At this point, it appears he has seen the error of his ways, and he jumps up and starts packing for a return—to exactly where we are not sure—but he wants to leave the bus and the isolation he has experienced. He quickly retraces his steps, but when he reaches the river he easily crossed before, he sees that it is swollen by the thawing of spring and that he cannot cross. He returns to the bus during a heavy rainstorm, clearly dejected and writes, "Rained in—lonely, scared."

The final chapter, "Getting of Wisdom," moves back and forth between the two timelines of McCandless's travels to Alaska and his decline toward death in the bus. While in California, he develops a friendship with a lonely but pleasant old man who has lost his wife and child in a car accident. They share stories and feelings, and once again the tale weaves its way back to family and McCandless's parents. At one point, the man says, "Son, what the hell are you running from?" (02:00:23) and later, in reference to the young man's parents, he tells a religious story of the meaning of forgiveness.

The scenes in Alaska show McCandless wildly shooting his gun in the air, frustrated that the game animals have disappeared; he is intensely hungry. The beginning of the end is when, relying upon his book on native plants, he mistakes a poisonous plant for an edible one that looks very similar. He becomes ill and his condition worsens. As he lies on the bed in the bus, he writes in his journal, "I have literally become trapped in the wild." The final scene shows a dying Alex, who slowly and painfully edges to a sitting position and then writes in between paragraphs in his copy of Dr. Zhivago, "Happiness only real when shared." Soon after, as he lies looking out the



bus window at the shifting clouds, he is taken back to a moment of reunion with his parents: “What if I were smiling and running into your arms? Would you see then what I see now?” (02:19:56-02:20:25), and then he takes his last breath. It is this brief moment of reconciliation that we now consider for our conclusion.

## Discussion

The story of Christopher McCandless as told in *Into the Wild* is an odyssey in which his movement across spaces and through places is one and the same as movement through phases of his life-changing experiences, which can be described within the frames of *Bildungsroman*.

Movement clearly lies at the heart of this story. The nature of such movement as seen by Aitken and Lukinbeal in their studied films and in road movies generally includes an inseparability of the vehicle with the road and journey. This linkage is not found in *Into the Wild*. In an early and important scene, the parents’ offer of a new car as a graduation gift to replace the ‘junkie’ becomes a heated issue, because McCandless considers the Datsun to be functional and any attempt to replace it with something new to be crass materialism. Even then, he readily abandons the car after a flash flood, which he does without hesitation or seeming regret. He had used the car for his post-High School trip and for the early phase of his final journey, but from the point of abandoning the car onward he rode in trains, cars, trucks, buses, travel homes, a kayak, and he walked; but getting another car never seemed to be an option. These rides were with new acquaintances, friends, and strangers, and so the process of movement and the journey itself, independent of the nature of the form of travel, becomes the frame for telling the story. It is ironic, then, that the end of the tale finds him alone in the Magic Bus, a “panoptic cell,” where he becomes “trapped in the wild” within an extreme scalar opposition of the vehicle and wilderness.

Each point McCandless encounters along the path of movement becomes a unique engagement of place and person, marking an inexorable, subtle, and yet cumulative shift in his very nature, as expected of his *Bildung*. At so many of his stops, when he gets to know people there are inevitably conversations about the family lives of his acquaintances, which in turn lead to references to his family life, which he ignores. As he goes through space and stops at each place, then, there are allusions of family from the couple in the “hippie van,” the old man, the enamored young woman, and his friendship with Wayne. His movement and the associated stops, moments, and engagements with people help define the nature of his journey.

At the same time, and throughout the film, there is a frequent and often abrupt shifting of scenes of wilderness to scenes of civilization. Wilderness is seen by McCandless as the ultimate goal, because it represents freedom and truth, while civilization stands for enslavement and deception. He sees his journey as a “climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual revolution” (00:12:35-00:12:46). The main opposition, civilization/wilderness, is also visually represented in different ways. His parents’ home in Annandale and the domestic violence that

happens there is represented in the form of a family film, showing anguished faces in close-ups that suggest “claustrophobic intensity” (Rose 49). For McCandless, home is a small, suffocating place from which he wants to flee. This can be contrasted with the scene of him standing on top of a mountain, with a long-shot of the bus, and with the camera panning across the landscape, suggesting physical and spiritual freedom. He is presented as a radical anarchist who defies every law of capitalist society, with the goal to be able to live off the land and not be defined by the relations of a market economy. He wants to be poor in material wealth and rich in the spiritual, believing that “careers are a twentieth century invention” (01:54:22). He does not want to get a job, get married, etc. because those are the imperatives of his social class. A person who does not participate in the circulation of money and goods is of little worth to capitalist society and so a person who proves s/he can live without (and outside) the system represents a subversive force that potentially jeopardizes that system. During the whole film, then, he is dedicated to that task by doing the opposite of all that is expected, either by the standards of his parents or society.

The death of McCandless is the central motif of the narrative, of course, both structurally and symbolically. The fact that he dies makes his rebellion more appealing to the imagination of much of the audience and constructs him as a sort of a modern romantic hero. However, and quite important here, even though it seems to function as the culmination of the whole process of subversion, his death actually has the opposite effect. In new historicist and cultural materialist criticism this effect of turning apparent subversion into its opposite is called “containment,” i.e. the “capacity of the dominant order to generate subversion so as to use it to its own ends” (Montrose 8). In McCandless’s case the goal of destabilization is not realized, while at the same time the prevailing norm is reinforced. The story of McCandless’s rebellion is therefore used because of its ability to support rather than subvert the dominant social and economic system. When he is starving, literally getting closer to death, he has to tighten his belt, punching new holes one by one as he is getting thinner and thinner. He is thus disappearing literally and physically, but what is also disappearing is the experience he has acquired, which is invaluable for the process of personality formation central to the genre of *Bildungsroman*. As he tells the old man at one point, “the core of man’s spirit comes from new experiences” (02:00:56). Each new hole in his belt destroys an image, symbolically undoing his journey towards freedom. Instead of the sought for freedom, then, he has “literally become trapped in the wild.” He was trying to find freedom in wide open and isolated landscapes, but in the end, he was confined in the small space of the bus, looking out its windows at a spectacular wilderness.

In spite of all the romantic ideals, McCandless is still defined by his social position within society and by his background. The set of skills he possesses is inadequate for survival in the wilderness. He has been defined by the place where he grew up, literally and symbolically. He knows how to deal with the everyday challenges of living in upper middle class suburbs, but the Alaskan wilderness is too much for him. Even though the narrative apparently celebrates a heroic attempt at a fundamental change in the way of life in the social as well as the spatial environment, in reality it represents

such a possibility only to contain it. Instead of breaking away from the society he despises, McCandless in fact regresses. His notation “Happiness only real when shared” would indeed be an appropriate ending of a *Bildungsroman*. Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, one of the greatest protagonists of the *Bildungsroman* genre, “realizes he has got to fit in, that is, in a mature can’t-beat-’em-join-’em accommodation, he internalizes the community’s norms by getting married, that classic comedic symbol for the self-limiting social contract” (Jeffers 51). McCandless is on the path to becoming a “good” citizen. He has sought solitude and individual experience of nature, far from the influence of society, afraid of being poisoned by the norms and values of his social class, but toward the end, he shows signs of conforming to middle-class values, which are reflected in his quote from Tolstoy.

He has indeed become “more sober, experiencing some degree of resignation,” as Bakhtin puts it (22). Just before McCandless dies, there is a kind of a vision, represented in the form of a family film, in which he is reunited with his family. This is clearly Penn’s addition to the story, presumably representing the protagonist’s last thoughts, for which there is no basis in Krakauer’s book. The film consciously emphasizes McCandless’s return to society, even though in reality his death prevents it. The narrative thus enacts a containment of the apparent subversion, restoring the social order that was ostensibly under threat. *Into the Wild* is in fact no more subversive than any other *Bildungsroman*, in which the hero inevitably returns to his social environment, becoming a model citizen.

We are intrigued by the apparent rebellion against that which Williams calls the “central, effective and dominant system of meanings and values” (“Base and Superstructure” 23). Viewed within the genre of *Bildungsroman*, *Into the Wild* shows us the possibility of radical individualism and its subversion of the values of the capitalist system, but it does so only to contain it. Even though individualism is one of the key ingredients of the American national imaginary, it is clearly only acceptable insofar as it does not threaten the overall social hierarchy. In spite of his apparent rebellion, McCandless stays within the frame of a dominant national ideology. It is fallacious to assume that nature, i.e., the Alaskan wilderness, is a realm beyond an ideological scope (Kollin 44). Even though the wild is supposed to be a place in every respect antithetic to the upper-middle class home of McCandless’s parents, it is in fact a part of the same system. Dominant culture is not monolithic, its ideology is not simply imposed by force; rather, it relies on “the alternative meanings and values, the alternative opinions and attitudes, even some alternative senses of the world, which can be accommodated and tolerated within a particular effective and dominant culture” (Williams, “Base and Superstructure” 24). Seemingly subversive forces within the system are still a part of the system, and rather than threaten it, they actually help consolidate it. This viewpoint closely resembles that of new historicists, who “are prone to regard cultures as regimes of constraint, designed to absorb resistance or ultimately turn it to their own account” (Ryan xv). These various contradictory forces are all part of the process of hegemony; as Williams has claimed, “The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is

never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society” (*Marxism and Literature* 112). The dominant social forces, far from being threatened by subversive elements, actually profit by the portrayal of subversion and its subsequent containment. They make use of cultural products such as film or the novel, which participate in the process of cultural integration, because cultures are not only integrated by explicit social patterns, “but also by enduring themes, values, configurations, and world views” (Kottak 41).

Literary texts are cultural not only with reference to the outside world, but also by their social values and contexts (Greenblatt 12), and the same is true of film. What we should focus on when reading such a cultural text is therefore not only the text itself, but the role it plays in a wider arena of cultural processes. As Greenblatt stresses, “[C]ultural analysis must be opposed on principle to the rigid distinction between that which is within a text and that which lies outside” (13). This is particularly true of such media and genres which have the pretense of conveying documentary truth. Discourses of the “real” and of the fictitious (or “reel”) are equally subject to interpretation in terms of power relations and ideology (Aitken and Zonn, “Representing”). Indeed, it is precisely the capitalist social system that “has produced a powerful and effective oscillation between the establishment of distinct discursive domains and the collapse of those domains into one another. It is this restless oscillation rather than the securing of a particular fixed position that constitutes the distinct power of capitalism” (Greenblatt 24).

In this essay, we have offered a different reading of *Into the Wild* that does not take the narrative at face value, but tries to examine the film critically with respect to a wider cultural context. We have analyzed the film as it is informed by *Bildungsroman*, emphasizing the element of mobility as crucial to the genre, and its role in the formation of the protagonist’s personality in terms of his social and cultural values. Although the narrative of the film purports to be subversive of the dominant ideology, it is our contention that the film, as a cultural artifact, in fact reproduces the values of the dominant ideology. Subversion and its subsequent containment are intrinsic to the genre of *Bildungsroman* in general, both in literary and film form, because it involves the protagonist’s departure from the dominant social values and, inevitably, his return. Even though the death of McCandless prevents him from physically returning to his social niche, his character development shows a clear tendency towards reconciliation with the norms of his social class. The fact that the film is based on a real story only serves the purpose of legitimizing the narrative in the audience’s mind and blurring the distinction between real and reel. Even though the narrative of *Into the Wild* seemingly represents an attempt at subverting dominant ideology, it does so only to enact containment of the apparent subversion and to reinforce the structure of that ideology.

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