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The Wilderness and American Tourist Ideas;  
the Dangerous Side of Nature's Representation in Popular Culture

In April 1992 a young man from a well-to-do family hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone into the wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. His name was Christopher Johnson McCandless. He had given \$25,000 in savings to charity, abandoned his car and most of his possessions, burned all the cash in his wallet, and invented a new life for himself. Four months later, his decomposed body was found by a moose hunter... (Krakauer, cover).

This passage appears on the cover of Jon Krakauer's novel, *Into the Wild*, 1996. As it states, the novel is the true story of a man who essentially erases his life, hitchhikes across the United States and lives with the minimum necessary for his survival. He eventually makes it to his goal of Alaska, where he lives off of the land in his ultimate adventure, only to die of starvation in an old bus four months into the trip. Since his death and the release of Krakauer's bestselling novel,<sup>1</sup> fans, or "pilgrims" as several sources<sup>2</sup> have come to call them, have retraced McCandless's journey in an attempt to live out their own adventures and visit the place where he died. Now,

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* spent 125 weeks on the *New York Times* Bestseller list when it originally came out. According to the list from Sunday, October 28, 2007, *Into the Wild* was second.

<sup>2</sup> Robyn DooLittle's article, "Alaskans Tired of Rescuing 'Pilgrims' in the Wild," Neal Karlinsky's "'Into the Wild' Inspires Adventurers, but at What Cost," and David Roberts' "Back Into the Wild" all refer to these travelers as "pilgrims." Krakauer also calls McCandless himself a pilgrim in explaining why he took his two year journey (85).

this number of visitors is again increasing with the recent release director Sean Penn's film adaptation<sup>3</sup> of the book.

As representations in popular culture, both the book and the movie versions of *Into the Wild* affect fans and tourists in that they influence where people go -- mainly a final destination of Alaska -- what they do when they get there, and even in some cases how they get there, such as hitchhiking like McCandless did. Because of this, the book and movie can be applied to the idea that popular culture itself defines tourism in America. However, instead of just using these two forms of popular culture to explain trends in tourism, I will use them to argue that Americans have a romanticized view of nature and travel due to the representations of popular culture found in both books and movies. This idea is important because the romanticized notion of nature can sometimes lead Americans to escapism and some then try to live out their idealized views with extreme tourism. *Into the Wild* will function as the case study for my argument because it is an example of what happens when people do take what is shown in popular culture literally. I will also examine the impacts that travel based on romanticized ideas of nature has on the tourists themselves and the areas where they go, such as the costs associated with rescues when travelers get into trouble and who must pay for them. Finally, I will end by observing how the residents of locations such as Alaska view extreme tourists.

Before discussing popular culture's impact on travelers and nature, however, it is important to first define the term popular culture itself. Stuart Hall states in his article, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'," that:

The cultural industries do have the power constantly to rework and reshape what they represent; and by repetition and selection, to impose and implant such

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<sup>3</sup> The film adaptation of *Into the Wild* was released on September 21, 2007. It was directed by Sean Penn and produced by Paramount Vantage Studios.

definitions of ourselves as fit more easily the descriptions of the dominant or preferred culture (67).

By pointing out that the culture industries (i.e.- the corporations in power of mass producing goods to create culture) have the power to “rework and reshape what they represent,” Hall argues that popular culture is what is created when a few businesses and/or people in power look at society and decide what will sell the best. As popularity changes, the products are reshaped and resold- thus coining the term popular culture. However, it is the second portion of this definition that is important to my argument. By repeating popular images over and over, Americans are in essence, taught to like something and this therefore helps us to create a definition of ourselves. These definitions that we create out of popular images are different for each person though, because people are able to choose which genre of popular culture defines them. For the purposes of this essay, those who choose adventure/outdoor books and movies to define them are important. After reading the books and watching the movies, these travelers make choices about how to live their lives in relation to what they read and see. Their interpretations of the stories and places in the books and movies can then lead to a romanticized idea of nature and sometimes escapism as a result. However, the traveler should not be held entirely accountable for having these idealized views because oftentimes, nature is in fact romanticized and shown as an escape route to many problems in American movies and literature. As representations in popular culture, people are then influenced by these depictions and it impacts their own relationships with nature and traveling.

### **Romanticism and Escapism**

In keeping with the theme of defining terms, it is also important to clarify the meaning of romanticism in terms of this essay. Historically, the romantic period took place in American

literature between 1828 and 1865 with some of the most famous writers being Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, and Henry David Thoreau (Abrams 215). This type of writing focused on nature and showing it in idealized ways. In her article, “Friedrich Schlegel, Romanticism, and the Re-Enchantment of Nature,” Alison Stone says, “[the romantics] hoped to restore the beauty, magic and mystery of nature in the aftermath of the ravages of science and technology,” (4). Here Stone is arguing that with the advent of new technologies, nature lost some of its magic and as a result, the romantics were trying to bring that back by showing it in idealized ways. The Industrial Revolution of course took place shortly before this period and because of it, nature was considered a type of commodity since trees and other forest products were used in the industrial processes. Nature was no longer seen as a fascinating place but one where money could be made. Science and technology also began to take more of a foothold over the popular culture of the time. With the romantic period however, writers again showed nature in idealized ways making it important to this essay and popular culture today because nature is still portrayed in this manner in some films and novels, having a profound effect on its audience.

In the case of romanticized books, the reader is able to create or imagine their own story using the idealized descriptions of nature as a backdrop, which leads to romantic ideas of it in travel related to literature. These romantic ideals can then lead to death or injury when travelers are not prepared. An example of this is McCandless himself, who was inspired by writers like Charles Dickens, H.G. Wells, Mark Twain, and Thoreau. His favorite writer though, was Jack London and his favorite stories were *the Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* (Krakauer 44). In relation to these stories, Krakauer says, “He [McCandless] was so enthralled by these tales, however, that he seemed to forget that they were works of fiction, constructions of the imagination that had more to do with London’s romantic sensibilities than with the actualities of life in the subarctic wilderness” (44). This passage is basically saying that McCandless got

himself so wrapped up in this literature that he forgot to think about the fact that it was fiction-romanticized fiction at that. As a result, he was unprepared for the harsh arctic wilderness.

Krakauer's quote is also important for my argument because it focuses on the romantic ideas portrayed in literature. London only spent one winter in Alaska; and after that stay he wrote his novels focusing on that location, which in turn inspired McCandless and no doubt others to travel there (Krakauer 44). Spending such a short time in a location forces the ideas written in the stories to be idealized interpretations of what it would be like to live in Alaska long term because London would have had to imagine what the harsh winters would be like in relation to the one he spent there. These idealized interpretations then lead to the romanticized idea of nature because they are not based on actual experience, but instead, on an imagining of the experience that is often optimistic.

As a result of nature having a romanticized image in popular culture it can also be looked at as an escape because viewers just remember the positive images and they think that some quiet time in the woods will help solve whatever problems they may have. This therefore implies that people in American culture sometimes look to nature as an escape from serious problems and conflicts in their lives because they see these positive images and the "healing" processes that occur in the woods. They then interpret what they see in films or read in books and think that it will be the same for them. According to Simon Hudson and J.R. Brent Ritchie, authors of, "Film Tourism and Destination Marketing: The case of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*," one of the "push factors"<sup>4</sup> of film tourism is the fact that going on a vacation to a place people have seen in a film is in itself an escape (260). For those who run away to nature because they have seen and believe the romanticized ideals, it can be an escape from larger problems and a search for self-identity or as Hall said, the definition of oneself. The idea of being able to escape to nature to find yourself

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<sup>4</sup> According to Hudson and Ritchie, "push factors" are "internal drivers such as the need for socialization, the need for escape" (260). Conversely, there are "pull factors" that influence travelers and these are "derived from the screen" (Hudson and Ritchie 260).

is in itself a romanticized idea, but nonetheless, people do embark on dangerous journeys to do so and as a result, they are often the focus of films and novels.

Following along the lines of escapism in literature, Edward Hoagland says in his essay, “Up the Black to Chalkyitsik,” that “We have in America ‘The Big-Two Hearted River’ tradition: taking your wounds to the wilderness for a cure, a conversation, a rest, or whatever. And as in the Hemingway story, if your wounds aren’t too bad, it works” (276). In “The Big-Two Hearted River,” 1924, Ernest Hemingway’s protagonist, Nick, has just returned from World War I and is haunted by what he experienced there. In order to move on and cure his wounds, he goes into the forest alone where he agonizes over each task that he must complete to take care of himself and get rid of his post-war pains. By the end, he begins to move forward in his life. Like Nick, Americans have a fascination with the wilderness and many do in fact believe that they can go there to cure their ailments, however serious they may be. By reading stories like “The Big-Two Hearted River” and *Into the Wild*, travelers get the idea that the wilderness cures, because in these stories, it does. By the end of Hemingway’s story, Nick seems to be on his way to recovering from the emotional wounds of World War I and though McCandless died in Alaska, many of his journal entries show that he did get what he was looking for out of his two year expedition across the United States (Krakauer 168-169). However, no one can be certain that McCandless was successful in escaping his problems because he did die, and though Nick seems somewhat successful at the end of his story there is no way to truly measure his success because he is a fictional character -- the creation of Hemingway’s mind.

Not only does escapism result because of nature’s romanticized image in popular culture, but film and literary tourism start as well. According to Hudson and Ritchie:

It has been suggested that the ideal film location to inspire film tourists is a formula of idyllic or extraordinary landscape qualities, a unique social and

cultural vantage point, and/or an image that tourists identify with and wish to explore or rediscover (260).

By suggesting here that the landscape in movies be idyllic in order to inspire film tourism, the writers are reinforcing the idea that nature is romanticized. If it were publicized as harsh in every movie, people would not want to go to the places shown. Instead, pristine mountains with snow glittering in the sun are shown and viewers think that it will be that way when they visit and while it may be for part of the time, the storms will come in quickly and dramatically change the landscape. For example, in each of the different locations featured in the film “Into the Wild,” it is clear to the audience where exactly McCandless is because of the scenic shots. Many of these images however, are the idealized, postcard views of a harsh location. There are parts of the film that show the true side of nature though, such as the raging Teklanika River that blocked McCandless’s path to safety when he finally did try to leave the Alaskan bush. This was the same river that he was shown wading across in the beginning of the film set early in the spring. Since it was safe at that time of the year, McCandless’s character did not think about it not being safe to cross in mid-summer, when filled with glacial melt water. If a viewer were to see just the beginning portion of the film, they too would be unaware of the danger surrounding the river since nature is idealized throughout much of the rest of the film. Certain steps need to be taken to ensure safety in these environments, but they are usually left out of many films because they do not fit the idealized versions of nature that the films try to portray.

### **Extreme Tourism as a Result of Romanticized Ideas**

The romanticized view of nature in films and books does in fact lead many people to believe that they can use it to escape from their problems and this increases tourism. However, it also leads to a special kind of tourism- extreme tourism. Hudson and Ritchie say in their article,

that film tourism is “defined...as tourist visits to a destination or attraction as a result of the destination being featured on television, video, DVD, or the cinema screen” (256). In the case of this argument, film tourism occurs as a result of the cinema screen and books; but, it is not just any type of tourism that is important here. Extreme tourism is what develops as a result of romanticized ideas of nature and the desire to visit locations that are known to be harsh and dangerous, such as the Alaskan bush. This location is featured in “Into the Wild” and it is a successful example of film tourism because as mentioned in the introduction, tourism to the bus outside of Healy, Alaska, where McCandless died is increasing as a result of the film’s release.

The specific people who view scenes in movies or read books that show the harsher side of nature and still want to visit these tough locations are the extreme tourists. Oftentimes they base their trips on romanticized views of nature and are sometimes looking for an escape. They may also just want to see what was in a film or novel for themselves. However, most of these travelers expect that the trips will not be easy and they want to challenge themselves. Many believe that the challenge will help them to become better people in the end, which is in itself another idealized and romanticized American idea. ABC News reporter Neal Karlinsky quotes one such adventurer, Marc Paterson, who at the time of the interview, was working his way down the Stampede Trail in Alaska following McCandless’s path. Paterson describes the hardships of cold, hunger, and working to catch his own dinner as rewarding, and while it may be for some travelers, it is also clear that he subscribes to the romanticized ideas portrayed by “Into the Wild.” In Karlinsky’s article, “‘Into the Wild’ Inspires Adventurers, but at What Cost?” Paterson states:

I’m going to test my limits, I guess, to see what it’s like to be hungry. I’m trying to put myself in an environment where nothing’s spoon-fed. I mean, where I might have to go run around the woods for a bit, or go fishing for a few hours to



catch a fish, catch my own dinner...It's really rewarding...I'm challenging myself (Karlinsky).

From this passage, it's clear that Paterson is excited about the possibilities of what he'll face on his trip. He looks forward to catching his own dinner and spending time alone in the woods. He knows it is going to be difficult and dangerous but he seems to thrive on that and thinks it's going to make him stronger in the end. When ABC News left Paterson, he was eight hours into his hike on the Stampede Trail and had yet to find food (Karlinsky). However, he was determined to make it to the McCandless bus and finish out his own adventure. Further into Karlinsky's article is a description of the dangers on the path to the bus. There is a possibility of drowning, a long, cold hike, and other dangers such as the many brown bears living in the vicinity. These things however, do not deter the extreme adventurers who, just like McCandless and Paterson, are interested in the journeys that they have seen in films and books and have a desire to recreate.

Paterson is just one extreme tourist who has ventured into the wilderness after reading a novel- many others have come before him and many more will no doubt follow. Krakauer says, "Alaska has long been a magnet for dreamers and misfits, people who think the unsullied enormity of the Last Frontier will patch all the holes in their lives. The bush is an unforgiving place, however, that cares nothing for hope or longing" (4). In this passage, Krakauer is referring to those who do subscribe to the romanticized ideas of nature that are perpetuated in films and books. People who are unhappy with their lives or who are looking to give themselves a definition flock to Alaska because they believe it has not been soiled by the mass media and world popular culture. They think they can go to Alaska, be alone to decide what they want their lives to be, and "patch" the holes. They will be alone there, but as Krakauer says, it is an unforgiving place, and those tourists who go with the stereotypical romanticized ideas of nature

may end up hurt or even dead because those ideas oftentimes leave them unprepared for the journey.

### **Romanticism, “Into the Wild,” and Extreme Tourism**

Though Krakauer’s abovementioned passage is from the book, and not the movie, the film shows nature in a romanticized way as well. During the film, viewers see McCandless traveling through pristine locations and dreaming about what he wants his life to be. In one scene when he’s describing the objectives for his trip, McCandless says, “I’m going to be all the way out there.” He goes on to say that he looks forward to being on his own, just living. This means that by being away from society and alone in nature, he will be able to reject the typical concerns that someone living in a city may have. Instead, he will be living his life the way he wants and he will find his own meaning for it.

The way the film is shot also reinforces this idea because nature is shown in a glorified way, which adds support to the romanticized idea that nature is a place that heals and patches holes in people’s lives. In his article “Back Into the Wild,” David Roberts explains, “The panoramas and vistas of the foothills north of Mount McKinley, many shot from the air...lend the film a gravity and magnificence that mirror the quixotic heroism of McCandless’s quest” (106). Here Roberts is saying that by shooting the film from the air and focusing on panoramic shots of Alaska, viewers are automatically getting an unrealistic vision of the wilderness. They are not seeing the raging rivers and harsh temperatures. Instead, they see picturesque mountains and forests that look perfect from the air. However, this is what director Sean Penn was aiming for because the idealized views of nature match McCandless’s quest. His character was enthralled with idealistic visions of the wilderness so by showing the Alaskan bush in this way; Penn reinforces the idea that nature is romanticized in representations of popular culture.

Throughout the film *McCandless* is also searching for a definition of himself in a society that he doesn't always agree with and is trying to escape the confines of his life before the journey. The film shows that he had family problems in that his father was abusive and had a separate family from a previous marriage. As a result, McCandless seemed to be looking for his own place in society because he felt he could not count on his family (Krakauer 122-123). However, instead of confronting these problems, he runs away to nature to live out the stories portrayed by writers like London, alluding to the larger idea that American culture does have an escapist ideal. Krakauer's passage mentioned in the previous section also ties back into the idea of nature being romanticized in American culture because it carries nothing but hope and it is unforgiving. In most forms of popular culture and the film in particular, it is not portrayed in this manner, but instead it is a place where one can go and find what they are looking for in life, without having to deal with any conflicts at home. This apparently makes it the perfect place for one to go when they need to escape and have an adventure.

### **Impacts of Romanticized Ideas, Escapism, and Tourism**

Throughout this essay we have seen how popular culture creates romanticized ideas of nature, sometimes leading to escapism, but what are the real effects of this on both the travelers and the towns they visit? I would argue that they are both positive and negative. It is positive for those who visit harsh locations, live out their adventures, and solve their problems before returning home. However, many more people experience negative results because of their romanticized ideas of nature. People who "had fouled their nests and were banking on better luck in the 'Last Frontier'" don't usually have such a contented experience (Hoagland 283). This quote of course refers to people who give up everything that they have in one location and move to one that is away from the demands of a city, or even their everyday life; again showing the

romanticized idea of nature. However, as shown throughout this essay, many of the people who do leave their safe nests are doing so based on idealized visions of a place and when they get to the “Last Frontier” they are disappointed. This is either because they are not prepared for what they will encounter or because they have expected everything about the trip to be positive and when it’s not, that “better luck” fades fast.

Toward the middle of *Into the Wild*, Krakauer tries to explain why McCandless went into the Alaskan bush unprepared for what he himself would encounter there. In doing so, he gives examples of three men, Gene Rosellini, John Waterman, and Carl McCunn, who also went into the wilderness and tried to live off of the land because of their own romantic ideals. Like McCandless, all three died. Krakauer says:

There are similarities among Rosellini, Waterman, McCunn and McCandless.

Like Rosellini and Waterman, McCandless was a seeker and had an impractical fascination with the harsh side of nature. Like Waterman and McCunn, he displayed a staggering paucity of common sense (85).

Here Krakauer argues that McCandless wasn’t alone in his fascination with nature and its harsh realities. However, by calling it an impractical fascination he hints back to the thought that McCandless’s idea of nature was a romanticized one. Because he was constantly exposed to nature as a place that heals and solves problems due to the books he read, he had this interest. In addition, his lack of common sense (i.e. - not taking a map or enough supplies) made his situation worse once he was exposed to the “real” version of nature. It is also important that Krakauer compares McCandless to these other men because it shows that he was not alone in his views on nature. Each one may have been searching for something different or trying to escape from disparate problems, but each chose to go into the Alaskan bush because they felt like it would be a challenge, an adventure, and it would improve their lives. Even though each one had

a different reason for going into the wild, the impacts of their journeys were the same -- each man died, alone in the wilderness because he was not prepared for the harsh, realistic wilds that he undoubtedly had to face before his death.

In addition to extreme tourism's impacts on the travelers themselves, it also affects the local residents as well. One of the most important impacts extreme tourism has on these people of the previously mentioned harsh locations -- namely Alaska -- are the costs associated with the rescues when the travelers get into trouble. It is these residents and their rescue personnel who must help the tourists who find themselves in danger because they are the closest people available to help. Many of these residents consider the rescuing a time consuming, dangerous inconvenience. In fact, it costs the state of Alaska \$2,100<sup>5</sup> per person rescued (Doolittle). David Talerico, mayor of Healy, Alaska, says, "Alaskans don't want to spend their whole summer out rescuing people" (Doolittle). This is exactly what is happening in the small town as a result of tourism to the bus where McCandless died and is a direct result of it being featured in popular culture.

On top of the costs and inconvenience of having to rescue stranded extreme tourists, residents are impacted because of the ways in which they view the travelers themselves. Hoagland says, "The idea of people retreating here [to Alaska] to lick their wounds, wool-gather, and recruit themselves seems odd to someone at home in the place...It's not the best site in the world for eremitic experiments or peace-love theatrics" (281-282). To the people who live in these harsh environments on a regular basis the idea of someone coming in unprepared to live out a fantasy after reading a book or watching a movie is absurd. Residents know that it is hard work to live there and most of the time; they do not have the romantic ideas of nature. Instead, they know how harsh it can be and criticize those who retreat to the wild without the proper

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<sup>5</sup>According to Robyn Doolittle's article "Alaskans Tired of Rescuing 'Pilgrims' in the Wild," rescues that require an airlift to safety from the McCandless site, cost \$2,100 for each trip. She refers to two specific occasions where a hunting guide named Coke Wallace from Healy, Ak., had to rescue people from a location near the McCandless bus.

respect for it. The residents can appreciate the traveler's desire to be near nature, but they know that it is not a place for people to cleanse their wounds.

## **Conclusion**

As representations in popular culture, books and movies have a profound affect on their respective audiences. Those depicting nature are important because they often show the wilderness in romanticized, idealized ways. As shown throughout this essay with the example of *Into the Wild*, travelers are impacted because of these scenic views of nature and both escapism and extreme tourism sometimes occur as a result. This type of tourism affects the travelers in negative ways because they are unprepared for their journeys and can get stranded in dangerous situations. It also harms local residents because they must spend their own time and resources rescuing the tourists. From the examination throughout this essay, it is clear though that the tourists should not be held entirely accountable for their views of nature. Popular culture spreads the idea of nature as a romantic, ideal place that cures all wounds whether they be emotional or physical. Travelers looking for an escape and extreme tourists who do not take the time to prepare themselves for their journeys are simply trying to recreate what is shown through the many forms of mass media and their representations in popular culture.

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