

# Sean Penn's *Into the Wild*. A journey that turns its back on banality

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## Abstract

Through the *road movie* genre, the film *Into the Wild* provides a specific outlook on personal growth. To illustrate this, a portrait is created of human haste on the road. The director seeks to examine the human desire to separate oneself from the banality inherent of modern times.

**Key words:** Road movie; Cinema; Banality; Solitude.

The film *Into the Wild* (Penn, 2007) narrates the story of Christopher Johnson McCandless, a recent graduate of Emory University, in 1990, who decides to donate his savings to charity and cut all contact with family and friends. Inspired to lead a simple life, unoppressed by the austerity of industrial society and certain family problems, he takes his old yellow car and drives west from Atlanta. Thus commences this film, whose story unfolds on a road trip, in true *road movie* fashion. In this case, Chris' destination was the Alaskan bush.

Intertextually, in terms of its narrative, the movie echoes that which occurred in July of 1845, when American writer, poet, and philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, constructed and lived in a cabin near Walden Lake, in Massachusetts forest. Thoreau, as a transcendentalist, decided to rethink life's banal priorities. He lived in isolation for two years and two months, during which time he wrote philosophical texts such as *Walden: life in the woods*, published in 1854.

*Into the Wild*, or *Hacia rutas salvajes*, as it is known in Latin America, address the concept of minimalism, in which the protagonist finds himself in a dilemma between morality and the irrelevant ordinariness imposed by social hegemony. When his trip begins, Chris is shown with those he meets on the road, where he uses the pseudonym Alexander Supertramp, which seems to either reflect personality duality in this character or his firm conviction to leave behind all facets of his past, even his name.

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This film, which runs 150 minutes, addresses a persistent reflection on the implicit power relationships in society. This is, doubtless, one of the most common topics in postmodern cinema, whose directors of note include Iñárritu, with *Birdman* (2014), and Christopher Nolan, with *The Dark Knight* (2008). Sean Penn both directed and wrote the script, based on American journalist, Jon Krakauer's (2008) book, and manages to create a melancholic and moribund climate that existentially saturates the audience.

The series production, proposed by editor Jay Cassidy, occurs in cyclical time with analogous events, in which the starting point is different from the movie's close, and a prolepsis structure is maintained. Posada (quoted by Cuevas, 2014) indicates that said story "... consists of interrupting the temporal line of narration to explain a future occurrence. It is a leap forward in time to later return to the present in the narration, acting as a resource for anticipation".

## Scenes

The initial intent of this film narratively seduces the audience. It begins with an initial close-up of Christopher's face, in a picture inside a wooden picture frame that, in addition to reflecting the character's importance in the story, makes way for a dark, downhearted scene in his parents' room, as his mother wakes unsettled, thinking that Chris had returned, after having heard his voice in a dream.

From the beginning, the audience is won over aesthetically, with the landscapes he traverses during his trips, with a palette of strong, striking colors. On his backpacking journey, Supertramp, played by actor Emile Davenport Hirsch, mentions the inspired words of Thoreau which accompanied him on the trip to Alaska. A new way of living, far away from a materialist world, in absolute freedom.

We have in America -The Big Two-Hearted River- tradition: taking your wounds to the wilderness for a cure, a conversation, a rest, whatever. And as in the Hemingway story, If your wounds aren't too bad, it works. But this isn't *Michigan* (2011)(or Faulkner's Big Woods in Mississippi, for that matter). This is Alaska (Thoreau, 1854).

## Sequences

If we understand that image flow and sequence order the events of the story, on this reel, the chronological order of the story is fragmented, after returning in time to various parts of the trip and the family's history. In the initial scenes, the camera performs a series of takes that fool the audience into thinking that the trip has already begun. The protagonist travels on a yellow and black train, and carries a blue backpack full of survival tools. On one side of the car, "Alexander Supertramp April 1992" is written in white writing. Both general and detailed shots are shown, and are united by sequence shots of a small locality. Concurrently, quotes

from the protagonist are presented that place us in the story's space and time. The quoted text is as follows: "Greetings from Fairbanks (Alaskan city). Arrived here two days ago. I'm prepared and have stocked all necessary comforts to live off the land for a few months. Might be a very long time before I return South".

Such is the movie's initial hook, which seeks to narratively seduce the audience by way of cinematographic discourse that places the spectator in the initial symbolic contract, as part of the dialogue between a personal experience and the cultural expectations roused by the film's initial images. Expectations, experience, and seduction conform the cultural field upon which the notes about this trip seek to map the terrain explored with the *road movie* setting. This genre was inherited from the initiatory journey literary tradition, which emerged in film at the end of Hollywood cinema's golden era in the 1950s, when automobiles were at their peak and constituted the technological revolution of the time, breathing new industrial and economic organization into North American cinematography.

The *road movie* originated in the U.S.A. at the end of the 1960s, from a series of preexisting, typically North American elements (the renewing spirit of border expansion, *highway* culture, counterculture), coinciding with the period known as New Hollywood (1967-1975)(García, 2018, p. 435).

To conclude, watching this movie takes the audience on a trip of internal revelation, thanks to the images, music, and locations that Sean Penn chose to film. The landscape reveals a world to be explored, and the pain of silent death that drives life toward its common destination. The audience is presented with a character who has a clear objective (to break away from common banality), and is a character who solidifies that which many consider at one time or another, but are incapable of doing.

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