

What drove Sean Penn Into the Wild?

By Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Sean Penn; screenplay by Penn, based on the book by Jon Krakauer; and *Across the Universe*, directed by Julie Taymor; screenplay by Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais

Actor-director Sean Penn opens his latest movie, *Into the Wild*, with lines from Lord Byron's *Childe Harold*: "There is pleasure in the pathless woods, / There is rapture on the lonely shore, / There is society where none intrudes, / By the deep sea and the music in its roar; / I love not man the less, but Nature more."

Byron's haunting verse, written in 1814, seems strangely out of place as an epigraph for a project that attempts to turn the real-life and tragic account of Christopher McCandless into the tale of a fearless adventurer and social renegade. McCandless's short life before he perished in the wilds of Alaska in 1992 at age 24 did not allow sufficient time for the young man "To mingle with the Universe, and feel / What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal."

In the film, Chris McCandless (Emile Hirsch) is a 22-year-old college graduate with a future marked for success. Disturbed by the materialism and hypocrisy of his wealthy parents, (Marcia Gay Harden and William Hurt), Chris donates his education fund to charity, and takes off without a word to his family, including his beloved younger sister Carine (Jena Malone). They will never see him again.

Chris literally burns his bridges when he abandons his car and sets fire to his money and identification. Based on the book of the same title by Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* follows Chris's two-year adventure through various parts of the United States and Mexico, ending with the fatal 113 days in a remote Alaskan region.

On his way north, Chris bonds with a collection of off-beat and non-conformist personalities. Now a "foot tramp" (traveler of the road by foot), he hooks up with the hippy "rubber tramps" (travelers of the road on wheels) Jan and Rainey (Catherine Keener and Brian Dierker), who fill something of the parental void. Chris then works for the farmer and quasi-outlaw, Wayne (Vince Vaughn). Afterward, he settles long enough in a drop-out encampment in California, again with Jan and Rainey, called Slab City, to establish a brief romantic connection with the soulful, but under-age, Tracy (Kristen Stewart).

During his last stop before heading to Alaska, Chris gets close to Ron Franz (Hal Holbrook), an aging widower who sees in the young man a reminder of his own unfulfilled ambitions. Without heirs, Ron wants to adopt Chris. While this never formally takes place, there is a spiritual covenant between them.

Chris's guides are his tattered volumes of Tolstoy and Thoreau. Precious to him are Thoreau's words: "Rather than Love, than Money, than Fame, give me Truth," which he interprets to mean eschewing civilization for untouched nature. He is on a quest to "kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual revolution." He has conspicuously renamed himself Alexander Supertramp.

Chris is pure and Christ-like and leaves an indelible mark on everyone he encounters, although the film does not convincingly make clear why and how. He is always aloof. Even in the case of his parents, it is the grief caused by his absence that mends their troubled marriage. Whatever Carine feels about her brother's flight from her life, she instinctively

senses that in some way he is repairing the universe. Carine's thoughts on this score are articulated in the movie's voiceovers.

As a rule, the plausible elements of the movie (with music and songs by Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder and scenes filmed in many of the locations to which Christopher McCandless journeyed) don't occur during the central figure's interactions with other people but in his primal struggle in the wild.

Chris is not terribly evolved despite his status in the film as an idealist and moral focal point. He is prone to spout banalities like "it is in life not necessary to be strong, but to feel strong" and "the core of man's spirit comes from new experiences." And why should we be sympathetic to this kind of irrationalist argument, that "if we admit that human life can be ruled by reason, then all possibility is destroyed"?

Penn clearly has poured himself into the scenes where Chris handles isolation in his Alaskan "magic bus,"—a rusted-out shell of a vehicle with a few rudimentary implements it was his good fortune to find during his first days in the harsh terrain. Could this be Penn's vision of utopia—a world where nature, not man, is master?

Such was his attraction to Christopher McCandless's story that Penn spent nearly a decade getting the rights to Krakauer's 1996 non-fiction bestseller. In an interview with *MoviesOnline*, the director speaks about *Into the Wild*: "It's about somebody who had a will that is so uncommon today, a lack of addiction to comfort, that is so uncommon and is so necessary to become common, or mankind won't survive the next century." The belief that consumerist human beings, not profit-driven class society, are responsible for the destruction of the environment is the film's underlying subtext.

Interestingly, the *MoviesOnline* interviewer quoted a park ranger who had described the real Chris McCandless as being not "particularly daring but just stupid, tragic and inconsiderate." She went on to reveal that "there was a hand operated tram a mile away from where he tried to cross the river [his inability to do so led to his death by starvation] that any decent map that most hikers would carry in a National Park would have shown."

Penn replied that "the point of this thing is the heroism of this will and this courage that this young man had. All the rest of it is somebody else's folly for me."

But "heroism of will" and "courage" have to be associated with substantial and socially advanced aims. If not, history shows that extreme voluntarism and action for its own sake can find quite right-wing channels. That Penn is oblivious to all this is *Into the Wild's* greatest "folly."

The qualities he genuinely and legitimately admires, self-sacrifice and integrity, are relatively rare in America today not because the population has degenerated, but for definite historical and political reasons, including a stagnant and reactionary social climate, which deliberately encourages the opposite: selfishness and callousness. One feels that Penn is driven "into the wild" because of a certain political discouragement. This is simply impressionistic and wrongheaded.

About Penn's last film, *The Pledge*, this reviewer wrote: "One needs to be obsessive about something important, one needs to pursue a

worthwhile and progressive *cause*. For the American filmmaker, first and foremost, the need to cut through the lies and myths about American class society. The absence of this sort of criticism, which Penn is fully capable of making, is a fatal flaw.”

Since this was written in March 2001, Penn has proven to be one of Hollywood’s most consistent opponents of the Iraq war. He was also physically involved in rescue operations in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In March of this year, he publicly criticized George W. Bush’s handling of the war and in April appeared on the television show, “The Colbert Report”, a contestant in Stephen Colbert’s “Meta-Free-Phor-All.” To strong applause, Penn commented: “We cower as you point your fingers telling us to support our troops. You and the smarmy pundits in your pocket—those who bathe in the moisture of your soiled and blood-soaked underwear—can take that noise and shove it.”

However, *Into the Wild* testifies to the fact that in many ways Penn mistakenly sees himself as a lone flare launched into the darkness.

Julie Taymor, most famous for her direction of the Broadway musical, *The Lion King*, is an artist with unusual visual inventiveness. Working off her background in puppetry, masks, folklore, mythology and mime, she collages a disparate variety of art forms to impressive effect. Her second film *Frida* (2002)—the first being *Titus* (1999) adapted from Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*—based on the life of left-wing artist Frida Kahlo is a visual feast, although a terribly shallow treatment of the subject.

Once more, Taymor’s latest film, *Across the Universe*, is crafted with her flair for uncommon imagery. The movie is a musical extravaganza set in the 1960s to reworked versions of 33 Beatles songs. It attempts to locate the political and cultural turbulence of the decade in the legendary quartet’s music. Despite certain audaciousness, Taymor’s movie is not without major problems.

The director hangs her plot on a painfully literal interpretation of Beatles tunes. For example—and unfortunately this was not intended as comedy—one of the characters, Prudence, makes an entrance “through the bathroom window” (*à la* Paul McCartney’s song). In another, the director has multiple “Mother Superiors” (played by Salma Hayek) jumping the gun as a war-wounded soldier, the character Max, hallucinates to the song “Happiness is a Warm Gun.” Max also has a scene with a hammer [“Maxwell’s Silver Hammer”].

Across the Universe features the Liverpoolian Jude (Jim Sturgess, who vaguely suggests McCartney), his American girlfriend Lucy (Evan Rachel Wood) and Lucy’s rakish brother Max (Joe Anderson). “Hey Jude” is of course performed.

Secondary characters include the Asian lesbian Prudence (T.V. Carpio), the Janis Joplinesque Sadie (Dana Fuchs) and JoJo (Martin Luther McCoy), a Jimi Hendrix look-alike. U2’s Bono makes an appearance as a Ken Kesey acid guru clone, singing “I Am the Walrus,” and Joe Cocker performs “Come Together” as a few different incarnations of street people.

The film catalogues the era’s most notable events and emblems, skimming the surface of the urban riots and anti-Vietnam war student protests. The scenes with dialogue, particularly the political ones, are crude, while Taymor reserves her flamboyance for the fantasy interludes, such as Eddie Izzard’s kaleidoscopic rendition of “For the Benefit of Mr. Kite.”

One notable exception is when Max goes to a draft center: A giant poster of the finger-pointing Uncle Sam menacingly comes alive to the tune, “I Want You.” Inductees, stripped to their underwear, are manhandled by robotic, jar-headed and masked soldiers with rifles who stomp around the subdued youth in military formation. The segment, however, goes off the deep end during the second part of the song, “She’s So Heavy,” as recruits hoist the Statue of Liberty above their heads and carry it off to Vietnam.

Another striking signette has the budding artist Jude pinning strawberries to a canvass. As the fruit’s red juice bleeds over the white surface, there is a metamorphosis: strawberry bombs rain down on the Southeast Asian country.

The film, however, is particularly lifeless when depicting the student protest movement. Lucy says vapid things like, “Paco [the Students for Democratic Reform leader] says we have to radicalize,” and “We’re in the middle of a revolution, Jude, and you’re doing doodles,” referring to Jude’s art. Despite the fact that Lucy has lost a boyfriend to the war and has a brother in the war, her politicization is unconvincing.

In an odd scene, Jude busts his way into the SDR [an obvious reference to SDS, Students for a Democratic Society] office, badgering its occupants, including Lucy, with a somewhat silly version of “Revolution.” His disdain for SDR’s claim to be able to change the world is apparently justified as, without too much soul-searching, the student leaders transition from protest to bomb-making, an allusion to the Weather Underground.

The film wants to rush past the revolt and get to the heart of the matter—a grand finale where everything is smoothed over as Sadie belts out “All You Need Is Love.” Estranged couples reunite and cops and protesters make their peace. It is doubtful whether John Lennon would have approved!

For all its adornment and imagination, *Across the Universe* is a complacent work. While Taymor may excel at adapting certain types of material, her skills can’t gloss over the lack of understanding and interest in politics and history apparent in her film. Looking at the 1960s through the musical eyes of the Beatles is a legitimate, if perhaps limited, enterprise. But her images and interpretation combine to form, as one reviewer put, a “vaguely insulting comic-book version of the ’60s.”

In an interview, Taymor speaks revealingly about the film’s supposed relationship to the present: “[N]ow it’s cool to be basically *stupid*. Whereas, back then it was cool to be smart, informed and if you had to protest something, you had to go out on the streets to do it. You had to congregate, because you didn’t have blogging, and couldn’t sit behind safe computers, or do it over cell-phones or message-texting or whatever.... But now kids have everything. They don’t need to rebel against anything. They can get what they want.” She adds, “except for the poor, the poor who go off to fight the war.”

The poor who fought the wars then and are fighting the wars now are largely missing from *Across the Universe*. Although the film’s Jude comes from the working class—as did the Beatles—the movie has no feel for the broader social impulses that motivated the population upsurge of the 1960s. Perhaps Taymor needs to climb out of her yellow submarine and take more notice of the world.

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