

***Into the Wild* (Sean Penn 2007)**

Mark Bousquet

Hollywood has had a long love affair with the American landscape. Typically focused on the open expanses of the American West (evidenced most prominently in the westerns of John Ford, Clint Eastwood, and Kevin Costner), directors have seemingly operated on the principle that intrinsic to any story set against nature is to highlight the bigness and beauty of the land. Sean Penn's approach (seen through the cinematography of Eric Gautier) to shooting the landscape in *Into the Wild* operates largely antithetically to the western. Instead of focusing on the largeness of the American wilderness, Penn's approach owes a stylistic debt to Terence Malick (whom Penn worked with on *The Thin Red Line* 1998), crafting an intimate relationship with the natural world.

*Into the Wild* is an excellent and effective adaptation of Jon Krakauer's book by the same name, relating the true journey of Christopher McCandless (Emile Hirsch), who left American civilization behind to seek a romanticized relationship to the wilderness of his literary heroes Jack London and Henry David Thoreau. After graduating from Emory University, McCandless donates the bulk of his savings (\$24,000) to Oxfam America and severs his ties with civilization, both official (destroying his identification and credit cards) and personal (deliberately misleading his family about his plans). Chris heads out on the road in search of his ultimate destination of Alaska. Along the way, McCandless recreates himself as Alexander Supertramp and has a series of meandering adventures with Jan (Catherine Keener) and Rainey (Brian Dierker), a pair of "rubbertramps" in California, working on a South Dakotan farm, kayaking down the Colorado River and into Mexico, reconnecting with Jan and Rainey at an RV community called Slab City in California, engaging in a non-consummated romance with an underage singer, Tracy Tatro (Kristen Stewart), and staying with Ron Franz (Hal Holbrook), an elderly widower who teaches him how to work leather just prior to Chris' ultimate journey to Alaska.

With the notable exception of his time working the farm of Wayne Westerberg (Vince Vaughn), Chris/Alex's most striking relationships are soaked in loss and tragic contemplation. His complete break from his parents (William Hurt, Marcia Gay Harden) and sister (Jena Malone) causes mostly pain in the

former and confusion in the latter. Jan sees her own runaway son in Chris, and Ron sees in him the grandson he will never have due to the death of his wife and child 35 years ago. It speaks highly of Penn's increasing skill as a storyteller (and Keener and Holbrook's work as actors) that while Jan and Ron's connections to Chris are fairly obvious to the audience, the slow-building admission of Jan and Ron to Chris about his role as a substitute for actual family still carries a strong, emotional impact. Chris, for his part, doesn't vocally reciprocate the void that Jan and Ron fill in his own life, yet when he is in his final moments of life in Alaska it isn't the past that flashes before Chris' eyes, but the hypothetical future, as he has a flash-forward fantasy of a happy reconciliation with his parents.

Penn sympathizes with McCandless without over-romanticizing him. The decision to have Chris' adoring sister, Carine, narrate the repercussions Chris causes in his family is key to this treatment; Penn willingly shows the harm Chris causes his parents, but it is Carine McCandless' understanding, loving voice that keeps the treatment of him sympathetic. While Penn downplays Chris' lack of experience in the Alaskan wilderness, he doesn't shy away from the damage Chris causes to the people who care for him. Wherever Chris goes and whomever he encounters (again, with the notable exception of Westerberg), he leaves them hurting and often without explanation. It is telling that the first time Chris disconnects himself from Jan and Rainey is after he has helped them reconcile their differences, as if merely being in the presence of a happy family unit is enough to drive him away. Penn allows Chris a moment of honor when he declines to consummate his burgeoning relationship with Tracy Tatro after she sexually offers herself to him at Slab City (on a bed and in her underwear), but Penn's sympathy for McCandless shines through as he doesn't interrogate Chris for leading an underage girl to think the relationship could reach that ultimate sexual destination. Yet Penn deserves credit for showing the damage Chris causes, even if he won't press McCandless to recognize his role (deliberate or not) in that damage. Chris moves on; others are left to pick up the pieces.

Perhaps the greatest singular achievement Penn accomplishes is the wide range of excellent performances he pulls from such a diverse cast. That veteran actors like William Hurt, Marcia Gay Harden, Catherine Keener and Hal Holbrook (in the finest screen performance of his fifty-plus year career) deliver at this high level is not surprising, but Penn also manages to garner engaging turns from comedians (Vaughn and Zach Galifianakis), younger actors still searching for their signature roles (Hirsch, Malone, and Stewart), and a crew member with no previous screen experience (Dierker). However, it is Emile Hirsch's open, energetic performance which carries the film. Portraying Chris as full of life and

## *Into the Wild*

largely non-conflicted about his journey from Emory to Alaska, Hirsch delivers the career-making performance only hinted at in even the best of his previous work (*Lords of Dogtown* 2005). Hirsch manages to portray Chris as both likeable and destructive, determined yet searching, knowledgeable and naive.

Ultimately, the core strength of Penn's film rests in its characters struggling to understand who or what they love: the McCandlesses to Chris, Chris to the wilderness, Rainey to Jan, and Jan to her runaway son. *Into the Wild* is certainly a film about Wilderness vs. Civilization, but that formulation is the back-drop to understanding why those we love can cause us such personal pain. It's the wilderness that Chris loves and it's his inability to understand the wilderness that leads to his death, first by failing to recognize that the changing seasons would make the river he needs to cross to get back out of the wild too dangerous to cross, thus shutting off his only known exit, and secondly by failing to recognize that one of the flora he'd been subsisting on was, in actuality, poisoning him from the inside, literally starving him to death. Chris may escape into the wild but he's still a product of civilization, a fact made clear by Penn in his most dramatic shot of the wilderness. After Chris dies, Penn pulls his camera out from a close-up of the bus, showing the largeness of wild Alaska. The further the camera moves away, the more of the landscape we see and the smaller Chris' bus (and thus Chris) actually become. That Chris chose to live in the wild in such a clear symbol of civilization as a bus reinforces his position as a piece of civilization isolated in the Alaskan wilderness. Chris learns the deadly lesson that while anyone may romanticize the wilderness, the wilderness does not romanticize you back.



**Signs Made Flesh: *Crime Scene Investigation* and the Realm of  
Necrosemios**

Matthew Gumpert

It would seem at first glance, that we are living in the age of the semiotic; a world super-saturated with meaning, a world in which everything is a sign, demanding to be read. The problem with that analysis, of course, is that all the signs seem to be pointing in the same direction, towards the same terrifying and transcendent truth. All the signs, that is to say, have already been read in advance. Thus, the more one observes the current state of contemporary American culture, the more it begins to look like the apocalypse *has already happened*; or if it hasn't yet, the wait is a mere formality. Which means that all these hermeneutic exercises are, quite simply, a farce. Meaning is no longer something to pursue, or something we are willing to wait for; for the answer has arrived, the mystery has unveiled itself. Signs, in effect, have become obsolete, for they have become the very things they pointed to. This is the fantasy of a post-semiotic world, a world without ambiguity, composed entirely of self-evident truths (and which therefore do not need to be read). This is the realm of *necrosemios*.

Among the highest-rated television series in America, aired in countless countries across the globe, is the police drama *Crime Scene Investigation*. *CSI* seems to represent the very apotheosis of hermeneutics itself: the heroes of the series are forensic scientists who spend most of their time examining fabric under microscopes, trying to identify the origin of mysterious stains. Everything here would appear to be tied to the reading of signs. But here, too, hermeneutics is a cynical farce. The scientific objectivity of the technician makes him the perfect, effortless reader, for whom there are no mysteries. Hermeneutics is now a formality, a mechanical process carried out by technologies beyond human understanding. No crime goes unsolved, no murderer goes unpunished, and no sign survives, at least not for long, in this realm of the techno-reader (a realm in which science and ethics coincide; when Good triumphs over Evil, Certainty triumphs over Ambiguity).

In fact, signs in *CSI* are mostly human corpses, or pieces thereof. And all of this elaborate show of interpretation is a pretence for the display of naked,

eviscerated, tormented bodies. Death here is not the real catastrophe (on *CSI* death is an event that has already occurred). The true catastrophe here would seem to be the violation of the body that occurs after death. The sign has indeed become naked, become flesh. In *CSI* we can see America's new pornography, a kind of obscene semiotics: the naked truth itself, on display. (Compare this to the gruesome tableaux of martyred bodies that traditionally brought the classical tragedy to a close; here the display of death is something ritual, formalized, and sacred.)

We are not so far, in fact, from the traditional genre of sexual pornography. In both genres, the mysteries of the body are unveiled to reveal the purely finite and completely readable contours and kinetics of flesh; in both, there is absolutely no ambiguity about the end of the exercise. But violence is more economical, and more efficient, than sex; in today's America, there is no time for seduction, or foreplay. Death is the new sex in today's America. (Here I would pair with *CSI* the astonishingly pornographic parade of violence in another film of Mel Gibson's, *The Passion of Christ*; here, too, the naked body is the sign, whose violation and death is displayed for our delectation.)

### **Information on *CSI***

By *CSI* in this article I am, in fact, referring to a CBS franchise of three distinct television series:

1. *CSI* (Syndication title: *CSI: Las Vegas*). The original series, of which the following two are "spin-offs." Starring William Petersen as CSI Head Investigator Gilbert 'Gil' Grissom. Airing 2000-2007. Creator: Anthony E. Zuiker. From Jerry Bruckheimer Television and CBS Productions.

2. *CSI: Miami*. Starring David Caruso as Lieutenant Horatio Caine. Airing 2002-2007. Creators: Ann Donahue, Carol Mendelsohn, Anthony E. Zuiker. From CBS Productions.

3. *CSI: New York*. Starring Gary Sinise as Detective Mac Taylor. Airing 2004-2007. Creators: Ann Donahue, Carol Mendelsohn, Anthony E. Zuiker. From Alliance Atlantis Communications.