Men on the Margin: Onscreen Outsiders and American Masculinity

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Men on the Margin: Onscreen Outsiders and American Masculinity

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

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Abstract

The central purpose of this thesis is to examine ideas of solitude and alienation as they relate to the masculine identity of men – particularly American men as represented in Hollywood films. The subjects include several outsider characters from history and fiction, which are divided into two primary categories: those men who have rejected society and sought solitude for themselves, especially in nature; and those who have been rejected by society, who find themselves on the relative margins of the patriarchal society they expected to embrace them. There is one question at the core of this exploration: If masculine identity is socially determined in accordance with strict normative values, what then of the outsider, who has ostensibly rejected, or been rejected by, society and is in many ways no longer subject to its rules?

After a general introduction to psychological and philosophical notions of solitude and alienation, I use the first chapter to develop a theoretical framework for discussing hegemonic American masculinity, which is potently represented on screen by the Hollywood film industry to both reflect and inform the society that funds it. I draw primarily from the work of sociological theorists, such as Michael Kimmel and R.W. Connell in the construction of this framework. In chapter two, I discuss the category of outsiders defined by their rejection of society. My primary subject in this case is Christopher McCandless, as represented in the book *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer, as well as the subsequent film of the same name, written for the screen and directed by Sean Penn in 2007. In the third chapter, I address the 'alienated man' and focus on Travis Bickle in Martin Scorsese's film, *Taxi Driver* (1976).

Although I reach various conclusions throughout the paper, these are finally summarised to resolve that the condition of being defined in relation to a society that he is distinctly separate from seems to produce a similar result in male onscreen outsiders. Whether he is isolated in 'the wild' or alienated in a crowded city, the man on the margin is inevitably plunged towards death. And if society stands in the way of that trajectory, there will be violence as well. The reverence and revulsion that the outsider elicits from society is reflected in his own view of himself – a mix of narcissism and self-loathing. The outsider is defined by a series of paradoxes because, according to American mainstream standards, the outsider is the man who is not a man. And yet he is every man.

Preface

> No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less … any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.[1]

In this extract from Meditation XVII, and certainly one of the most famous passages John Donne ever wrote, we are invited to believe that humanity is connected. "Man" is presented as a creature of community with his happiness and sense of fulfilment inextricably bound up in the fate of all mankind. In spite of his selfishness and private ambition – and whether he realises it or not – every man would rather cast his lot along with "the main" that he might share in some common purpose. Donne suggests that the stronger desire in the heart of man is not to 'roam free', but to belong.

Over three centuries later, an essay by Thomas Wolfe echoes what is arguably the essential sentiment of Meditation XVII – the idea that man is designed not for solitude, but for community. He does, however, address the problem of man's loneliness from a different perspective: whereas Donne describes the universal ideal in order to emphasise the personal problem, Wolfe universalises the personal problem to highlight the ideal. In an essay entitled 'God's Lonely Man', he examines the nature of loneliness and writes:

> The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, peculiar to myself and to a few other solitary men, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence.[2]

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[1] Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1923), 98.
[2] Wolfe, 'God's Lonely Man' in *The Lost Boy* (1965), 193.

As opposed to, "No man is an island," Wolfe's angle might be rephrased to state that, in fact, *every* man is an island, longing for a shipwreck – for some vessel of humanity to breach the shallows and make contact. Though perhaps we ought to, we do not *feel* "a part of the main." In Wolfe's view we all feel isolated – that is the fact – but our desire is to be "a piece of the continent", to play a meaningful role in society, to be known and understood, to have some consequence in the lives of others.

In this thesis, it is my intention to examine and analyse ideas of solitude and alienation as they relate to the masculine identity of men – particularly American men as represented in Hollywood films. I have chosen as my subjects several outsider characters from history and fiction, and divided them into two primary categories: those men who have rejected society and sought solitude for themselves, especially in nature; and those who have been rejected by society, who find themselves on the relative margins of the patriarchal society they expected to embrace them – alienated, but remaining within the physical demarcations of the social environment. In the former group, my primary subject will be Christopher McCandless, as represented in the book *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer, as well as the subsequent film of the same name, written for the screen and directed by Sean Penn in 2007. McCandless was a young man who chose solitude, nature, and adventure over sustained social engagement, and he will be discussed with reference to historical precursor and influence, Henry David Thoreau. In the category of the 'alienated man', I will focus on Travis Bickle in the film *Taxi Driver* (1976) with reference to John Hinckley – a historical person deeply influenced by the fictional protagonist in Martin Scorsese's film.

Introduction

"Loneliness brings forth what is original, daring, and shockingly beautiful: the poetic. But loneliness also brings forth the perverse, the disproportionate, the absurd, and the illicit."
— Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*

Since the theoretical framework for this thesis is fairly expansive, I would like to introduce and develop some of the primary analytical lenses in this section of the introduction. Though there is no overarching theory of masculine isolation peculiar to either cinema or literature, I have drawn heavily from work in other disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, and sociology in order to cultivate what I hope is a conceptually rich, yet clearly defined, understanding of the two central ideas: masculinity and solitude.

A key psychological theory I refer to is Mosher and Tomkins's "script theory" as applied to hypermasculinity in their 1988 paper, 'Scripting the Macho Man: Hypermasculine Socialization and Enculturation'. As I will show in my analysis of Christopher McCandless, this system is particularly useful in organising and making sense of lives as depicted in film and literature, since, "[i]n script theory, the basic unit of analysis is the scene." And a scene is defined as "an event in a life as lived [and] a connected set of scenes become the plot of a life that we call personality. A script connects and organizes information … through a set of rules for interpreting, responding, defending, and creating similar scenes."[3] According to Mosher and Tomkins, "The principal motivator in humans is affect," where "affect" is

[3] Mosher and Tomkins, 'Scripting the Macho Man: Hypermasculine Socialization and Enculturation' in *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1988), 61.

defined as "sets of muscular and glandular responses in the face … which generate sensory feedback that is either inherently 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable'."[4] Man's desire, then, is to elicit the affect which will judge his behaviour 'acceptable', thus approving the validity of his ideal masculine life script. More specifically, Mosher and Tomkins point out that "[i]n American culture, affects are divided into antagonistic contrasts of 'superior and masculine' or 'inferior and feminine'."[5] This view of behaviour modification in order to meet the approval of a masculinity evaluator, particularly by repudiating the feminine, is consistent with the 'performance' of masculinity for the approval of other men, as I will discuss in greater detail in my examination of the primarily sociological concept of "hegemonic American masculinity."

Mosher and Tomkins also state that "cultural products such as myths and dramas" form part of the network of influence that pass "ways of living … from one generation to the next."[6] Film and literature, but especially film as disseminated by the Hollywood marketing juggernaut, play crucial roles in perpetuating the normative ideology of hegemonic masculinity in America. Through the vicarious participation allowed by reading and the cinema experience, men are able to "learn" masculinity as "prototypical idealized scenes are experienced and re-experienced with roles recast or reversed in new but still idealized scenes of fantasies of heroic triumph that incorporate the hero and his rules into our scripts."[7] The pervasive influence of the media in America might seem almost inescapable, and so the

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 64
[6] Ibid., 74
[7] Ibid.

outsider, the man who to some extent removes himself from the range of that collective voice, becomes an intriguing subject for study.

Although Henry David Thoreau was by no means dedicated to philosophy exclusively, he did consider himself a "natural philosopher" as opposed to a naturalist.[8] In my discussion of solitary outsiders like McCandless, I will refer to the transcendental meditations expressed in his definitive work, a major contribution to the Western canon, which deserves some explanation. *Walden* is a literary diary, philosophical treatise, naturalist's notebook, political polemic and social commentary – a record of an experiment in life "live[d] deliberately"[9] and devised, perhaps primarily, for the sake of the record itself. Thoreau built himself a cabin in the woods beside Walden Pond, and lived there from July 1845 to September 1847. *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, was published seven years later. Whatever *Walden* is, it is not a unified manifesto. Thoreau's relentless, unbridled pursuit of "truth" in all its forms takes him in no single direction. He applies his mind to everything, anything – history, mythology, philosophy, literature, and contemporary culture, but also the minutiae of daily life, such as the weather, the pond, animal encounters, personal finances, and how best to tend a bean field. It seems nothing was immune to his interest; anything could be employed for analysis and analogy. *Walden* is an ambitious kaleidoscopic celebration of the immeasurable potential, the adventure that is human thought.

This pursuit of thought as an end in itself leads to a variety of luminous truths and beliefs that do not necessarily cohere very neatly. It is not surprising, therefore, that 'paradox' is a

[8] As Ethel Seybold explains, he was "[n]ot a naturalist, but a natural philosopher. Thoreau was very jealous of the distinction." Seybold, *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics* (1951), 9.
[9] Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (1937), 81.

term often used in reference to Thoreau and his work.[10] And I doubt this would have surprised Thoreau, who was quite comfortable with the fact that his meaning was not always obvious, observing somewhat sardonically in *Walden* that "… in this part of the world it is considered a ground for complaint if a man's writings admit of more than one interpretation."[11] This paradoxical nature, along with a sense of being misunderstood, is at the heart of the outsider, and will be explored in great detail throughout this paper. Several aspects of Thoreau – the man and his work – will inform my discussion of *Into the Wild*.

Nikolai Berdyaev, though more distinctly a philosopher than Thoreau, was also absorbed by the metaphysical or, as Maria Banerjee describes him in her introduction to *The History of Meaning*, "gifted with an incurable longing for transcendence."[12] Expelled from Russia in 1922, he spent most of his remaining years writing and lecturing in Paris. Living in exile clearly influenced his work – perhaps most significantly, *Solitude and Society*, his existential meditations on human alienation. I have used some of the ideas Berdyaev expresses in this book in my analysis of outsiders – both those who abandon society and those who find themselves alienated within it.

In terms of his philosophical work, Albert Camus is most famous for developing the paradox of the Absurd, which, despite being similar to existentialism in some ways, is directly opposed to it in crucial areas. Jean-Paul Sartre, the principal founder of

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[10] In his essay 'The Extra-vagant Maneuver: Paradox in *Walden*,' Joseph Moldenhauer writes, "The idiosyncrasies of Thoreau's personality and opinions are so absorbing that 'paradox' has always been a key term in Thoreau scholarship." Ruland, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Walden: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1986), 73.
[11] Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 289-90.
[12] Banerjee, introduction to *The History of Meaning* by Nikolai Berdyaev (2009), viii.

contemporary existentialism, provides a helpful counterpoint to Camus's Absurdism – primarily because they are so similar in approach, and yet so disparate in content. In Leo Pollmann's view, they are alike in that they both have "a certain radical sense of what existence is for twentieth-century man, an endeavour not to dwell on fractional aspects such as society, religion, political action … but to go after the essence of existence itself and seek a fundamental solution for the problems it poses."[13] Pollmann explains Camus's divergence as follows:

> Camus is not the least bit interested in the ontological question: 'I have never known anyone to die for the ontological argument'. He is not interested in being, not in the existentiality of existence, but in the meaning of being, the meaning of existence.[14]

Camus's literature is a positive journey towards the goal of meaning, whereas the 'nausea' of Sartre's novel, *La Nausée*, is supposed to create "the condition man needs in order to become aware of the absolute meaninglessness of existence."[15] For Camus, life is not meaningless, it is paradoxical, it is Absurd, and the Absurd life "is a matter of persisting,"[16] because there is "honour in enduring the world's absurdity."[17] He also declares: "Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable."[18] Pollmann also identifies this exuberant determination in Camus, not to shrink from life: "throughout Camus's works the sun of a joyous oneness with the world and the moment breaks through again and again."[19]

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[13] Pollmann, *Sartre and Camus: Literature of Existence* (1976), 111-112.
[14] Ibid., 11.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1981), 52.
[17] Ibid., 86.
[18] Ibid., 110.
[19] Pollmann, *Sartre and Camus* (1976), 114.

This idea of "oneness with the world" suggests the influence of Neoplatonic thought, which is closely linked to Thoreau's Transcendentalism and his philosophy concerning man's relationship with the natural environment. Pollmann argues that Camus is drawn towards Plotinus, the "leading representative of Neoplatonism," because of "the thrust toward profound, paradoxical unity in his thought and his system …. For Plotinus there exists between the perceptible and the intelligible world something ultimate and, so to speak, fluid, which preserves the unity of the whole: the World Soul."[20] This sense of universal cohesion is perhaps that "continent" from which the outsider is excluded; the lonely man is a soul in exile, disconnected from that "something ultimate."

Although primarily a novelist, Thomas Wolfe wrote an autobiographical essay on loneliness, which has been referenced by philosopher, Michele Carter, in the context of existentialism.[21] In the essay, entitled 'God's Lonely Man', Wolfe describes his personal relationship with loneliness and extrapolates from this point to assert that loneliness is inherent to the human condition. Taking my lead from Paul Schrader who quotes from the essay on the cover of his screenplay for *Taxi Driver*, I use that particular quotation from 'God's Lonely Man' to underpin my analysis of Travis Bickle.

Philosophy and psychology play important roles in my theoretical framework for this thesis – especially in terms of understanding isolation and loneliness. However, in my creation of a lens for interpreting representations of masculinity in film and literature, I have drawn primarily from sociological theorists, such as Michael Kimmel and R.W. Connell. Since my

[20] Ibid., 119-20.
[21] Carter, 'Abiding Loneliness: An Existential Perspective on Loneliness' (2003), accessed 15 August 2014, www.philosophicalsociety.com.

analysis is limited to Hollywood films and historical examples of solitary men in the United States, I have developed a detailed exploration of what I call "hegemonic American masculinity." It encompasses the dominant forms of masculinity propagated by mass media in America, which in turn is promoted throughout the world as a dominant culture. Hegemonic American masculinity offers a clearly defined counterpoint for the examination of masculinities that deviate from normative standards – especially 'outsider' masculinities. I will develop this theory in the next chapter before applying it to the subjects portrayed in the primary texts of this thesis, but first I would like to introduce some other key terms.

Firstly, there are several related terms surrounding the concept of an individual who seeks out a solitary existence, either on the fringe or far removed from society. For the purposes of this study, 'outsider' will function as a catchall for men in all kinds of separation from society – whether physical, psychological, or ideological. 'Solitude', however, will be more specific to 'the solitary man' and will denote seclusion from society without a sense of exclusion or loneliness. It will generally carry a positive connotation when actively sought out by an individual who wishes to extract himself from the company of others, such as the 'hermit' – especially by entering the natural environment, for example the 'outdoorsman' or 'mountain man'. Of course, solitude is not always actively chosen. Sometimes it is inflicted on a man against his will – as in the misfortune of the 'castaway', or the sentence of the prisoner. In such cases, when solitude is the enforced removal of an individual from society at large – whether that be a formal, physical or a naturally evolving psychological sense of removal – I will refer to it as 'isolation'.

This sense of isolation may be exacerbated in the case of the 'rebel' or 'maverick' – a man who struggles to relate to others comfortably, or share their values by compromising his own. It is by his conflicted nature that the rebel or maverick can be distinguished from the man who simply seeks solitude. Characterised by a complex relationship with society, the rebel spurns the company of those he considers evil or foolish, but also avoids those whom he loves and respects, so as not to sully or complicate their lives with his own defiant, unpredictable nature. Possibly fuelled by a sense of unworthiness, he 'protects' those whom he admires by removing himself from their lives, thereby sabotaging any chance he has of gaining a sense of belonging – choosing, instead, to adhere to his strict and mysterious moral code, which never allows him to settle, for settling would mean compromise. A man who never compromises will always wander, and he who always wanders will never belong. These terms relate closely to Christopher McCandless, who might also be described as a 'loner' – a person who prefers to be alone; one who tends to avoid the company of others without taking any drastic, long-term steps towards total seclusion from society. At social engagements, for example, this person would generally be found on the periphery, and might be referred to as a 'lone wolf'. The 'loner' occupies a kind of nebulous liminal space between the solitary and the outcast. It is not always clear which came first – the loner's rejection of society, or society's rejection of him. But, in either case, the cycles of rejection tend to perpetuate one another.

Although solitude can be a source of pleasure when sought out, it may also – when inflicted as isolation – be a singular form of torment. Travis Bickle experiences a sense of anomie similar to McCandless, where both men rebel to an extent and live fiercely according to value systems that are disconnected from, or even directly opposed to, the mainstream

values of society. However, Bickle's psychological isolation from society seems far more damaging; he is haunted by a relentless loneliness, which I will link with the term 'alienation', referring to the phenomenon whereby a person feels rejected or 'othered' by a society in which he or she may reasonably expect to find a sense of belonging and acceptance. Eliot Deutsch provides a useful definition:

> Alienation is the state of being shut off from what, among the primary domains of our existence, is perceived to be a rightful place of belonging, whether experienced as an acute existential estrangement or as something put forward abstractly as a conception of the human condition, as in the expression, once so frequently used, "the alienation of modern man."[22]

I will couple this concept with the term 'outcast' or social outcast. I have defined a few other terms related to solitude that I have included in a small glossary at the end of this chapter, as they are not directly germane to my thesis. For example, terms such as 'hermit', which Thoreau and McCandless were occasionally called, and 'wild man' – a term not explicitly used to describe him, but an association that forms part of the narrative fabric that maintains the legendary status of McCandless in popular memory.[23]

Having discussed the theoretical framework and some essential terminology, I would like to explain how they might be applied to the primary texts, as well as why these particular lenses are valuable in defining and understanding the masculinity of outsiders in American film and literature. In doing so, I will also raise some of the major points that will be argued in this dissertation.

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[22] Deutsch, 'Loneliness and Solitude' in *Loneliness*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (1998), 115-6.
[23] As I will explain in the McCandless chapter, his memory in popular culture is certainly not restricted to legendary or 'heroic' status. In fact, this may not even be the dominant opinion, but my point is merely that the degree to which he is remembered as heroic, draws to some extent from the mythology of the 'wild man'.

Film and mainstream literature have always been powerful vehicles for imparting ideological values to American society. Hollywood in particular has been enormously successful in exporting these values to an ever-widening global audience. However, this global impact is not within the purview of my thesis, and so I will focus here, albeit briefly, on the role of Hollywood in the creation of hegemonic American masculinity.

In *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres*, Brian Baker explains how film and literature have historically been deliberately implemented in the reconstruction of American ideology.

> To counter both the possibility of male violence or homosexuality, and the disruption to the familial and economic structures of capitalist America, masculinity had to be redefined in the postwar period. The ideological framework of this redefinition was partly carried out by representations of men in film and popular fiction.[24]

In her brilliant examination of masculinity in cinema, *Big Bad Wolves – Masculinity in the American Film*, Joan Mellen describes a foundational perception in the early days of Hollywood, which is crucial to our understanding of its enduring cultural role.

> [In the 1930s]… The secretary of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors, in the tradition of Will Hays, voiced his approval that the screen could now "reflect and foster a renewed interest in the heroes of the law." From its beginnings insiders in the film industry were well aware that films did not merely reflect feelings prevalent among audiences, but also "fostered" and shaped our definitions of what makes a man a hero.[25]

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[24] Baker, *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres* (2006), 4.
[25] Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (1978), 77.

Mainstream cinema does not simply reflect its intended audience, but also reinforces normative value systems. As both mirror and megaphone, it not only attempts to tell us who we are, but who we ought to be. It creates standards to aspire to, offers us models to emulate. Mellen's titular big bad wolves are "those male stars who have consciously and stridently demonstrated what it means to be a man."[26] What I would like to emphasise here is that this idea of *demonstrating* masculinity for an audience is comparable to what Michael Kimmel refers to as every man's performance of masculinity "for the evaluative eyes of other men."[27] And much like the unattainable qualities of hegemonic American masculinity, the heroes of cinema are designed to inspire imitation, and yet remain inimitable. Mellen unpacks the power relations at work in this ideological transaction:

> Hollywood knows well that men cannot live by the models of masculinity it proffers. Never intending that men actually attempt to model themselves on such heroes … rather [s]uch heroic images afford men and women vicarious release while rendering them small and timid by comparison.[28]

The very exemplars of masculine power are in fact agents for the disempowerment of both women and men. Normative mainstream masculinity is inherently comparative and, therefore, inherently social. The approval of other men, particularly those of a higher perceived masculine status, is the ultimate determining factor in the creation of a personal masculine identity. Kimmel goes as far as to assert that men are not even trying "to test themselves against some abstract standards." Men desire to seem masculine "because they want to be positively evaluated by other men." Masculinity is a role performed for an audience of peers. Kimmel argues that masculinity is not simply "hard-wired" and inevitable.

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[26] Ibid., 4.
[27] Kimmel, *Manhood In America* (2006), 224.
[28] Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (1978), 5.

"If it were biological, it would be as natural as breathing or blinking. In truth, the Guy Code [hegemonic American masculinity] fits as comfortably as a straightjacket."[29]

Roger Horrocks calls it "male autism" – a term which refers to the way men in Western society tend to feel trapped by their public persona.[30] He compares it to "Sartre's analysis of 'bad faith', which is the condition of being something that one fundamentally is not."[31] The autistic male "portrays that which society demands,"[32] which is not necessarily what he is, or would otherwise be. Horrocks explains that "it's as if he is always in public, never a private man," because the "persona has devoured" the autistic man – "there is a horrible sense that such men don't know they are playing a part, they are so accustomed to it."[33] So it is that even when he is alone, the performance continues – as if for an imagined audience. In a sense, then, all men are actors: a sociological phenomenon that makes a study of cinematic representations of masculinity particularly relevant to an understanding of masculine identity.

And if masculine identity is indeed socially determined in accordance with strict normative values, what then of the outsider, who has ostensibly rejected, or been rejected by, society and is in many ways no longer subject to its rules? The loner has no costume he is forced to wear, no lines to rehearse – he has no one for whom to perform. The man alone, the solitary wanderer, the lone wolf out in the wild, or even the lonely man with no friends to prove anything to: his may be a masculinity not motivated by conformity to any laws but his own.

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[29] Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (2008), 51.
[30] Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities* (1994), 107.
[31] Ibid., 109.
[32] Ibid., 109.
[33] Ibid., 110.

Or is he, as Horrocks suggests, "always in public, never a private man," and therefore finds himself performing for an imagined audience of male jurors?

I will conclude this thesis with a discussion of solitude as something either sought or inflicted on a man, and how those two apparently separate experiences impact on his masculinity. The condition of being defined in relation to a society that he is distinctly separate from seems to produce a similar result in the onscreen outsider. Whether he is isolated in 'the wild' or alienated in a crowded city, the man on the margin is inevitably plunged towards death. And if society stands in the way of that trajectory, there will be violence as well.

The outsider is by no means a simple subject for analysis. It is a nebulous cluster of traits that make up the masculine identity of the male outsider, as is so elegantly described in Thomas Mann's 'Death in Venice':

> The experiences of a man who lives alone and in silence are both vaguer and more penetrating than those of people in society; his thoughts are heavier, more odd, and touched always with melancholy. Images and observations which could easily be disposed of by a glance, a smile, an exchange of opinion, will occupy him unbearably, sink deep into the silence, grow full of meaning, become life, adventure, emotion. Loneliness brings forth what is original, daring, and shockingly beautiful: the poetic. But loneliness also brings forth the perverse, the disproportionate, the absurd, and the illicit.[34]

He is a man of aberrations and extremes – at once complicated and fascinating – and it is my intention in this thesis to dissect and examine the outsiders portrayed in my chosen texts,

[34] Mann, 'Death in Venice' in *Great German Short Stories*, ed. Evan Bates (2003), 18.

with reference to real-life men, in order to test the degree to which they conform to, or reject, hegemonic American masculinity.

Glossary

An 'anchorite' is someone who has withdrawn from the world for religious reasons, to seek God and piety in earnest, and might refer more specifically to someone from the early Eastern Church.

The 'wild man' is a recurring figure in mythology[35] and generally appears bearded and barely clothed. In his essay published in *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, Hayden White writes that

> From biblical times to the present the notion of the Wild Man was associated with the idea of the wilderness – the desert, forest, jungle, and mountains – those parts of the physical world that had not yet been domesticated."[36]

His place is the wild; he exists outside of society and, in fact, represents the antithesis of civilisation. He is, therefore, necessarily solitary. This solitude may also be a condition inflicted by society, as indicated by his association with the 'scapegoat' figure,[37] which, in ancient Hebraic practice, was symbolically burdened with the accumulated sins of the people on Atonement Day. The goat was then driven into the wilderness. The wild man is thus a kind of projected symbol of society's base instincts, causing society to seem civilised by comparison.

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[35] "The image of Wild Man or savage, covered only with a loin-cloth, or a garment of leaves or skins, is a common one in the folklore of almost every country." Cirlot, *Dictionary of Symbols* (1971), 372.
[36] White, 'The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea' (1972), 7.
[37] Ibid., 373.

The 'recluse' and the 'hermit' are two very closely linked terms. A recluse is "A person who lives a solitary life and tends to avoid other people."[38] The etymology of recluse "shut up, enclosed"[39] connotes the idea of a 'shut-in' – a person "confined by physical or mental disability."[40] This term therefore suggests a sense of helplessness in the individual; a person at the mercy of his physical or mental condition. It has a very 'interior' quality; the recluse seems to have less agency in his search for solitude.

'Hermit', by contrast, despite being strictly almost synonymous with 'recluse', seems imbued with a sense of vigour, even adventure. Etymologically, the hermit is positioned in the desert;[41] away from society, necessarily out of doors, and in an extremely harsh environment, where only the resilient could survive. Like the recluse, the hermit is also associated with the 'desert fathers' – fourth-century desert monks in Egypt – and their practice of solitude in search of spiritual enlightenment and holiness. I will expand on this when I discuss St. Anthony the Great. In medieval literature, the hermit is also associated with wisdom, as hermit figures often give advice or even medical assistance when encountered by knights-errant, for example, the hermit who helps Lancelot in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. 'Hermit' is the dominant term that I use to refer to any individual who leaves society to make his home in the wild, implying a sense of self-sufficiency and self-determination.

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38 'Recluse,' Oxford English Dictionary, accessed 15 August 2014, www.oxforddictionaries.com.
39 'Recluse,' Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed 15 August 2014, "Recluse (n.) Early 13c., 'person shut up from the world for purposes of religious meditation,' from O.Fr. reclus (fem. recluse), noun use of reclus (adj.) 'shut up,' from L.L. reclusus, pp. of recludere 'to shut up, enclose', from L. re-, intensive prefix + claudere 'to shut'. www.etymonline.com.
40 'Shut-in,' Oxford English Dictionary, accessed 15 August 2014, www.oxforddictionaries.com.
41 'Hermit,' Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed 15 August 2014, "Hermit (n.) Early 12c., from O.Fr. (h)eremite, from L.L. ermita, from Gk. eremites, lit. 'person of the desert,' from eremia 'desert, solitude,' from eremos 'uninhabited.'" www.etymonline.com.

Hegemonic American Masculinity

"How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?" — Bob Dylan

Written in 1962, Bob Dylan's now-classic folk song, "Blowin' in the Wind", only soared up the charts in the following year when Peter, Paul and Mary released a cover version and sold 300,000 copies within two weeks.[42] It was not simply the poetic lyrics, or the cyclical melody, lifted from an old Negro spiritual, that caused such spectacular popularity; it was a song that captured the zeitgeist of 1960s America with a new war beginning and the Civil Rights movement gaining momentum. The song also flung Dylan into stardom, launching one of the longest-running, most prestigious music careers of all time. Now, almost fifty years later, the song remains popular[43] not because it so perfectly represents the spirit of its time, but because it seems to represent something far more universal, allowing it to transcend its own historical moment.

The paradoxical first line is a fine example of the song's enduring relevance. Indeed, relevance to 'all men', but also to the definition of American masculinity. "How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?" In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams slyly mocks the vague, rhetorical nature of the question by suggesting that it

[42] Ganz, 'Mary Travers of Peter, Paul and Mary Dead From Cancer at 72' in *Rolling Stone*, 16 September 2009, accessed 15 August 2014, www.rollingstone.com.
[43] In 1999, the song was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. In 2004, it was ranked #14 on Rolling Stone magazine's list of the "500 Greatest Songs of All Time", accessed 20 July 2013, www.songfacts.com.

is, in fact, the "Ultimate Question", and that the answer is forty-two.[44] What is interesting, however, is the question's implicit paradox, which neatly encapsulates the problem of what I will come to define as hegemonic American masculinity: it is possible to be a man and yet not be a man. A man is not necessarily a man; he has to be called one first. Men are not considered men by the mere virtue of their sex. Manhood is a status conferred only upon the deserving – those men who have proven their masculinity to other men.

The line is also thought to be an allusion to Big Bill Broonzy's "When Will I Get to be Called a Man?"[45] – a 1955 blues song about racial discrimination, which echoes the sentiments of alienation and dehumanisation explored by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* published three years earlier. In his description of the psychological trauma of having one's identity conferred by the coloniser, Fanon makes a clear statement of his desire: "I wanted, quite simply, to be a man among men."[46] Broonzy catalogues all the ways he has sought to earn his manhood, his right to be called a man: military service, overseas travel, education, heavy manual labour. And yet, as the lyrics explain, "Black man's a boy, don't care what he can do." In the song, Broonzy says he is 53 and still has never been called a man.

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[44] After seven and a half million years of work, Deep Thought, the super computer, finally has an answer to the "Ultimate Question". ""The Answer to the great Question … of Life, the Universe and Everything … is … Forty-two', said Deep Thought, with infinite majesty and calm" (179/80). Having discovered the answer, the two philosophers, Frankie and Benjy, who are responsible for Deep Thought, realise they do not know the question. Desperately they try to come up with a question profound enough to warrant seven and a half million years of work and could reasonably have forty-two as the answer. Eventually they settle on the following:
Then Frankie said, "Here's a thought. *How many roads must a man walk down?*"
"Ah!" said Benjy. "Aha, now that does sound promising!" He rolled the phrase around a little. "Yes," he said, "that's excellent! Sounds very significant without actually tying you down to meaning anything at all. *How many roads must a man walk down? Forty-two.* Excellent, excellent, that'll fox 'em."
Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1989), 204.
[45] Wikipedia, 'Blowin' in the Wind,' accessed 15 August 2014, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blowin%27_in_the_Wind.
[46] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), 92.

He wonders whether he might have to wait until he is 93. The song critiques a system in which the black male is excluded from the very same axis of power he looks to for affirmation of his masculinity: the white patriarch. Broonzy died three years after recording the song, but the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s would seek to redress the injustice he observed in his lyrics.

Another song at the time, which also managed to denote something of the spirit of the age was "Satisfaction" by The Rolling Stones, released in 1965. The lyrics contain another reference to a man who is not a man – specifically the man on TV who "can't be a man 'cause he doesn't smoke the same cigarettes as me." Mick Jagger's line concisely exposes the subtext of a typical advertising message – that your identity, or masculinity, is at stake if you are caught using the wrong brand. Speaking about the impact of the song, Jagger explains:

> And it captures a spirit of the times... which was alienation. Or it's a bit more than that, maybe, but a kind of sexual alienation. Alienation's not quite the right word, but it's one word that would do.[47]

The key point I want to draw from this is that popular songs confirm and, to some degree, prefigure what sociologists generally agree upon: masculinity is not an inevitable consequence of being born male; it is a title men feel they must earn – masculinity must be proven to an audience of other men. And if there is a division between what a man essentially believes himself to be and what society determines that he ought to be, there is a division of identity. This can lead to a sense of alienation or 'divided self', fuelling a pursuit of social acceptance, or – in the case of masculinity – homosocial approval. "Homosocial" is defined very clearly by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick:

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[47] Fornatale and Corbett, *50 Licks: Myths and Stories from Half a Century of the Rolling Stones* (2013), 45.

> 'Homosocial' is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual', and as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexuality'.[48]

In *Guyland*, Michael Kimmel's incisive study on the prolonged adolescence of contemporary masculinity, the author explains that men are compelled by the question of what it means to be a man. Phrases like: "Be a man!" and "Man up!" are widely used and men instantly interpret them as challenges to be met, according to normative standards of behaviour. The difficulty, however, is that despite the apparent simplicity of the instruction, being a man is not necessarily an easy challenge to meet. In the back of his mind, every man knows there is always a chance he might get it wrong. And even if he gets it right, for how long must he keep getting it right? How many roads?

As is the case with most human weakness and personal anxiety in Western society, the "crisis of masculinity" has been identified as a business opportunity. There are now books, magazines, blogs, websites and videos catering to the identity-defining needs of this generally high-spending market segment, the 18 to 29-year-old, and older, male. One example is the popular blog, The Art of Manliness created by Brett McKay in 2008.[49] This is an extract from the 'About' section of the site, which explains something of the phenomenon:

> *Welcome to The Art of Manliness — a blog dedicated to uncovering the lost art of being a man.*
>
> Many men today feel adrift and have lost the confidence, focus, skills, and virtues that men of the past embodied. In an increasingly androgynous society, modern men

[48] Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), 1.
[49] The blog receives over 13 million page views per month and 5 million "absolute unique visitors." Demographics: 75% of readers are male, 52% are between the ages of 18 and 34, and 56% have a college education. 'The Art of Manliness,' accessed 15 August 2014, www.artofmanliness.com.

> are confused about their role and what it means to be an honorable, well-rounded man.
>
> The causes of this male malaise are many — from the cultural to the technological. One factor is simply the lack of direction offered men in the popular culture. Men's magazines today are largely about sex, sports cars, and getting six-pack abs.
>
> The Art of Manliness seeks to fill this void and offer an alternative to those who believe there's more to being a man than expensive clothes and the hot babe of the month.
>
> AoM is a blog about growing up well, aimed at men and their unique challenges and interests. We explore all things manly — from the serious and philosophical to the practical and fun. We seek to uncover how to live with grandpa's swagger, virtue, and know-how in the present age by wedding the best of the past to the best of the present. The end goal is to create a synergy of tradition and modernity that offers men a way forward and signposts on how to live an excellent, flourishing life.
>
> Ultimately, the Art of Manliness aims to encourage our readers to be better husbands, fathers, brothers, citizens — a new generation of great *men*.[50]

The insecurity and anxiety attached to the adolescent process of proving masculinity is far more pronounced in American culture than in communities of developing nations that adhere to cultural traditions with clear rites of passage. This is due, in part, to the fact that – aside from certain religious practices – there are no formal rites of passage in American society. As Kimmel explains "... the transitional moment itself is so ill-defined. We, as a culture, lack any coherent ritual that might demarcate the passage from childhood to adulthood...."[51]

In many cultures outside of the United States, the patriarchs of a community devise various rituals through which to confer adult male status upon the boys who are ready to become

[50] McKay (2008), accessed 15 August 2014, www.artofmanliness.com (author's emphasis).
[51] Kimmel, *Guyland* (2008), 100-1.

men.[52] The rituals are diverse and, in several cases, quite shocking. The general requirements are the impassive endurance of pain, fearlessness in the face of mortal risk, and periods of isolation. Although not all of these rituals are conducted according to a one-off policy, the boy is very well aware of his masculine status in accordance with clearly delineated steps throughout the transition as overseen by respected adult males within the community.

The masculine status of the American adolescent is far less certain. Hazing rituals in college fraternities, which in some cases are quite disturbing, offer some kind of passage, but the problem is that the 'authorities' conducting the ritual and supposedly conferring masculinity are, in fact, adolescents themselves – boys only a few years older, who have no respect or status as elders in the greater community. Fuelled by "the desperate desire to feel worth, to feel powerful, to be validated as a man ... these almost-men seduce themselves into believing that these guys ... hold the magical key ... to a feeling of confident manhood with nothing left to prove."[53] But the security is only an illusion, as Kimmel explains, "In the United States, proving masculinity appears to be a lifelong project, endless and unrelenting"[54] and it is "always up for grabs."[55] It widens the gap between being a man and feeling like a man, leaving a lot of room for confusion. The tagline for the sleeper indie hit film *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004) sums up rather well the gangly teenage outsider protagonist: "He's out to prove he's got nothing to prove."

[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., 116.
[54] Ibid., 100.
[55] Ibid., 51.

A man's masculinity can be challenged at any moment, without warning, using any of countless slurs denoting effeminate behaviour: wuss, fag, fairy, pansy, etc. The "gender police" strike suddenly.

> Other guys[56] constantly watch how well we perform. Our peers are a kind of 'gender police', always waiting for us to screw up so they can give us a ticket for crossing the well-drawn boundaries of manhood. As young men, we become relentless cowboys, riding the fences, checking the boundary line between masculinity and femininity, making sure that nothing slips over.[57]

A man accused of crossing the boundary line is invariably on the defensive. Instantly, he has something to prove. It could even be enough to start a fistfight. But what would the two men be fighting over? What is the mysterious 'something' that is so vital to prove? There are, of course, many theories, but one of the most enduring normative definitions of masculinity remains Robert Brannon's four basic rules written in 1976, quoted and explicated again in Kimmel's *Guyland*:

> "No Sissy Stuff!" Being a man means not being a sissy, not being perceived as weak, effeminate, or gay. Masculinity is the relentless repudiation of the feminine.[58]
> "Be a Big Wheel." This rule refers to the centrality of success and power in the definition of masculinity. Masculinity is measured more by wealth, power, and status than by any particular body part.
> "Be a Sturdy Oak." What makes a man is that he is reliable in a crisis. And what makes him so reliable in a crisis is not that he is able to respond fully and appropriately to the situation at hand, but rather that he resembles an inanimate object. A rock, a pillar, a species of tree.
> "Give 'em Hell." Exude an aura of daring and aggression. Live life out on the edge. Take risks. Go for it. Pay no attention to what others think.[59]

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[56] A 'guy' as defined by Kimmel is a 'Peter-Pan-type' inhabitant of 'Guyland', which is "both a stage of life, a liminal undefined time span between adolescence and adulthood … and a place" where 'guys' gather to avoid the responsibilities of adult life. Ibid., 4.
[57] Ibid., 47-8.
[58] The concept of gender is necessarily constructed. It is, however, useful to observe who it is constructed by, how, and for what purpose. Here, the idea of 'the feminine' is constructed by hegemonic American masculinity, using gender stereotypes informed by generations of patriarchal capitalism, for the purpose of perpetuating that system.

These are only four of the broadest rules. They can be divided into subcategories and discussed further, which is what I intend to do in this chapter. But it is important to note that over the last 35 years these rules have changed very little in the hearts and minds of high school and college men interviewed on the subject.[60] And yet these men are trapped – caught trying to live according to standards that are impossible for most men to conform to, and impossible for any man to conform to at all times.

The broad and enduring nature of Brannon's rules can largely be explained with reference to reference the work of R.W. Connell, whose definition of hegemonic masculinity is crucial to the theoretical framework of mainstream normative American masculinity:

> The concept of 'hegemony', deriving from Antonio Gramsci's analysis of class relations, refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.
>
> That is not to say that the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity are always the most powerful people. They may be exemplars, such as film actors, or even fantasy figures, such as film characters.[61]

Of course it is extremely difficult to give a precise description of the current form of masculinity that is "culturally exalted" above any other in the United States. However, the absurdity of the dilemma in which men must conform to impossible standards designed and

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[59] Kimmel, *Guyland* (2008), 46.
[60] Kimmel quotes James O'Neil, a developmental psychologist, who has "been conducting studies of this normative definition of masculinity for decades, 'One of the most surprising findings is how little these rules have changed'." Ibid., 46.
[61] Connell, *Masculinities* (2005), 77.

perpetuated by the men themselves, is highlighted in Erving Goffman's description of what he considers the dominant image of American masculinity – an impossible list of attributes.

> In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports ... Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself – during moments at least – as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.[62]

The list seems at once too long and too short. Though it presents a wide range of masculine qualities, it still manages to neglect some others that may have been included had Goffman considered a longer lineage of American manhood, such as the war veteran or the pioneer – both of whom certainly conform to an archetypal American manliness, which I will discuss later in this chapter with reference to 'wilderness', Richard Slotkin and frontier mythology. Despite its limited historical perspective and possible lacunae, the description is interesting in that it defines normative masculinity as a checklist – a rubric by which men can evaluate each other, and also themselves. And so, of course, Goffman's primary point is that there are no real men who fully adhere to all the rules of masculinity. It is for this reason that the hegemonic, media-informed idea of masculinity is so unsound – a state popularly referred to as the "crisis of masculinity."[63] However, it is important to note Leo Braudy's warning that there are "contradictions and paradoxes" within this 'crisis' and scholars need to beware the temptation to consider it "a phenomenon solely of our own time."[64] It is perhaps more

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62 Kimmel, *Guyland* (2008), 54.
63 Roger Horrocks, for example, uses the phrase as the title for his book, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities*
64 Emig and Rowland, *Performing Masculinity* (2010), 10.

useful to think of the crisis as Christopher Forth prefers: "the instabilities of Western masculinity."[65]

In order to develop a broader theoretical framework towards an understanding of hegemonic American masculinity, I will unpack Brannon's rules, distilling several subcategories. As I discuss these, I will begin to create a lexicon for hegemonic American masculinity, which will inform my analysis of the primary texts in this thesis. Some of the key terms and phrases are outlined in this list of masculine traits compiled by Patrick D. Hopkins:

> For a 'man' to qualify as a man, he must possess a certain (or worse, uncertain) number of demonstrable characteristics that make it clear that he is not a woman, and a woman must possess characteristics demonstrating she is not a man. These characteristics are, of course, culturally relative, and even intraculturally dynamic, but in late twentieth-century U.S. culture the cluster of behaviors and qualities that situate men in relation to women include the by now well-known litany: (hetero)sexual prowess, sexual conquest of women, heading a nuclear family, siring children, physical and material competition with other men, independence, behavioural autonomy, rationality, strict emotional control, aggressiveness, obsession with success and status, a certain way of walking, a certain way of talking, having buddies rather than intimate friends, etc.[66]

Perhaps the most essential aspect of masculinity is the fact that it has no essential aspect. It has no essence. It is a necessarily relative ideological construct, existing only in relation to other concepts and cultural practices. In some ways it is easier to define masculinity in terms of what it is not – the primary foil being a particular kind of femininity, that is, 'the feminine' as defined by hegemonic masculinity. Despite being largely confused about what masculinity is, men seem to be a lot more confident about what it is not. What it means to be a man

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[65] Ibid.

[66] Hopkins, 'Gender Treachery: Homophobia, Masculinity, and Threatened Identities' in *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in Light of Feminism*, ed. Larry May et al. (1996), 98.

depends largely on what most men would define as feminine. And so we have what Kimmel calls the "relentless repudiation of the feminine".[67]

In his book, *The History of Men: Essays on the History of American and British Masculinities*, Michael Kimmel asserts that "[s]ince the early 19th century, the quest for manhood has revolved around a flight from women, a relentless effort to avoid all behaviours that might remotely hint of the feminine."[68] The idea that women are an oppressive influence on the masculinity of men and boys persists even in contemporary idiom. The phrase 'ball and chain', for example, is used by H.M. Parshley in his translation of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1953) to describe traditional gender roles in marriage, with the expression later becoming a pejorative slang term synonymous with 'wife', or, to a lesser extent 'fiancée' or 'girlfriend'. This obviously reinforces the popular belief in mainstream masculinity that monogamous commitment to a woman is an obstruction to personal freedom.

A related 'bondage' metaphor – being 'tied to her apron strings' – can refer either to a man dominated by his wife, or a boy who is overly attached to his mother. A repetition of the metaphor of constraint in reference to the suppression of boyhood masculinity is expressed through the unsevered umbilical cord of the 'mother's boy' or 'mama's boy' – highlighted by Philip Wylie as one of the many symptoms of all that was wrong in American society as described by the comprehensive vitriol of his 1942 best-seller, *Generation of Vipers*, in which he coined the term 'momism', the misguided worship of the American mom, whom he

[67] Kimmel, *Guyland* (2008), 46.
[68] Kimmel, *The History of Men: Essays in the History of American and British Masculinities* (2005), 19.

compares to a caterpillar and Hitler, and characterises as having "the stupid voracity of a hammerhead shark."[69]

Seventeen years later, Ed Gein, America's first famous mama's-boy-turned-psycho-killer confessed to two murders and numerous acts of body snatching after investigators found collections of dismembered parts, variously hidden and on display, in his home. Among his ghoulish 'trophies' were the tanned skins of female bodies which he used to make a 'woman suit' so he could pretend to be female.[70] This would later inspire the creation of the serial killer character, Jame Gumb or 'Buffalo Bill' in Robert Harris' *Silence of the Lambs*. Gein was shy, effeminate, bullied and shared an unnaturally close relationship with his mother, whom biographer Harold Schechter describes as Gein's "only friend and one true love."[71] She was an extremely controlling woman and often abused her two sons. Author, Robert Bloch, acknowledged the influence of Ed Gein on his serial killer character, Norman Bates.[72] In 2001, on the American Film Institute's list of the one hundred most thrilling films, *Psycho* was rated number one[73] – evidence of the film's enduring popularity, as well as the cross-generational impact of Bates, the maniacal mama's boy. He is a character who remains an exemplary deterrent against 'momism', representing the kind of man that no man would want to be.

Kimmel reaches further back to Huckleberry Finn and his desire to run away from Aunt Sally, whose feminine power will "civilize" him. It is Kimmel's understanding that "[w]omen

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[69] Wylie, 'Common Women' in *Generation of Vipers* (1955), 184-196.
[70] Wikipedia, 'Ed Gein,' Wikipedia, accessed 15 August 2014, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ed_Gein.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] American Film Institute, 'AFI's 100 years … 100 Thrills,' accessed 15 August 2014, www.afi.com.

meant, first, mother, with her incessant efforts to curtail boyish rambunctiousness; and later, wife, with her incessant efforts to keep men in harness as responsible and respectable workers, fathers, and husbands."[74] Hegemonic masculinity compels men to reject, to run from, to "relentlessly repudiate" all that which could be considered feminine.

In order to relentlessly repudiate the feminine, 'the feminine' must be clearly and rigidly defined. It is for this reason that hegemonic American masculinity has a tendency to reinforce chauvinist stereotypes of femininity, positing women either as domineering, controlling and civilising, or weak, sexually available, and passively awaiting objectification. Sexual conquest plays a vital role in proving masculinity and is directly proportional to both the number of conquests and the attractiveness of the women – where the latter is determined by the general consensus of the aspirant man's social circle: those men for whom he is performing his masculinity. Kimmel explains that the 'quantity' requirement for sexual partners is one of the fairly straightforward rules for hegemonic masculine behaviour, or what he calls 'the Guy Code': "The sexual mandate of the Guy Code [is to] have sex with as many women as possible, as frequently as possible."[75] Harry Brod, in his essay on 'Pornography and the Alienation of Male Sexuality', makes the point that in order "[f]or women to serve this purpose of achieving male social validation, a woman 'conquered' by [a man] must be a woman deemed desirable by others."[76]

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74 Kimmel, *The History of Men* (2005), 19.
75 Kimmel, *Guyland* (2008), 172.
76 Brod, 'Pornography and the Alienation of Male Sexuality' in *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in Light of Feminism*, ed. Larry May et al. (1996), 242.

It would seem that while men want to appear masculine in order to win the approval and sexual compliance of women, this is not an end in itself. Women are also used as a kind of currency to display masculinity to other men, which is always the ultimate goal in the male effort to conform to hegemonic masculinity. This notion of women as currency, and sexual conquest as potential means to homosocial respect and power, leads to the objectification of women, and the transformation of sexual intimacy into a trial.

In 'About Losing It', Lucy Candib and Richard Schmitt's chapter in *Rethinking Masculinity*, the authors describe male sexuality as "a challenge to one's identity as a man … Sexual functioning [has] become this special test which not all men can pass – a test that a man must pass over and over again until he is no longer able to do so."[77] In addition to frequency and peer-approval of the women's attractiveness, sexual conquest is also an arena in which particular expertise must be demonstrated, thereby creating another category for failure.

Sexual prowess, in terms of hegemonic masculinity, is not determined by the satisfaction of the partner. Rather, it revolves around phallic potency. Candib and Schmitt point out that both psychologists and therapists have observed that "for many men the erection – instantaneous, hard, enormous and indefatigable – is the center of their manhood. What men fear most is the loss of that, in most cases, mythical sexual power."[78] While the penis seems to be the central focus of man's sexual prowess, there is also a sense in which he is distanced from his body. Underlying the desire to establish "mythical sexual power" is a

[77] Candib and Schmitt, 'About Losing It' in *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in Light of Feminism*, ed. Larry May et al. (1996), 220-1.
[78] Ibid., 213.

profound fear of impotence,[79] and it is this fear which necessitates an almost mechanical infallibility of the erect penis, thereby coding the phallus as a kind of disembodied instrument required for the demonstration of potency, rather than an integrated physiological part of male sexuality. Brod explains that pornography maintains this idea of the body as "performance machine" through "the myth of male perpetual readiness," which corresponds to the "myth of female perpetual availability." He describes a "split consciousness" wherein the man observes his body, searching for mechanical flaws, even while he is "supposedly immersed in … sensual pleasure."[80] I will later discuss the role of pornography in man's alienation in greater detail with reference to Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*.

Due to the repudiation of anything perceived to be traditionally feminine, the domestic, even the family, environment must be rejected. Mellen cites the cowboy hero of the Western as an example of men fearing women and the "emasculating consequences of domesticity."[81] It would seem that a 'real man' ought not to be involved in childrearing, a charge generally associated with the domestic environment. The emphasis for masculinity is therefore on siring children, while 'being a father' is secondary. Offspring are evidence of his potency, his virility, which is vital to his masculine reputation. He needs to embody all that is not impotent, not flaccid. Even gestures, his style of walking, must denote a solidity, a stiff, unflinching quality – at all times rejecting any movement that is too fluid, loose and flailing. It is the reason why men, though they might be entertained by comedies, and even musicals,

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[79] Candib and Schmitt observe that "the very idea of impotence fills most men with dread." Ibid., 213.
[80] Brod, 'Pornography and the Alienation of Male Sexuality' (1996), 241.
[81] Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves* (1978), 17.

do not look to the clowns and dancers as models of masculinity. Mellen explains that these stars of comedy and song, "fall outside the stereotype of the self-controlled, invulnerable, stoical hero who justifies the image of unfeeling masculinity as a means of winning in a world that pounces on any sign of weakness."[82] It is vital that all feelings remain inner feelings – the retained and restrained emotional energy of 'real men'.[83]

The American male's determination to supress his feelings and to avoid emotional vulnerability is directly opposed to the intimacy required for an Aristotelian idea of 'complete friendship' characterised by self-disclosing conversations leading to "[a] genuine knowledge of the other."[84] In their chapter on "Male Friendship and Intimacy," Robert Strikwerda and Larry May confirm Hopkins' final entry in his "cluster of behaviours" that exemplify mainstream masculinity in U.S. culture, that is, "having buddies rather than intimate friends."[85] Strikwerda and May note that studies in America have shown that same-sex friendships among men are less satisfying than those among women. And they quote Daniel Levinson who found through interviews with men that "friendship was largely noticeable by its absence. As a tentative generalization, we would say that close friendship with a man or a woman is rarely experienced by American men."[86]

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[82] Ibid., 5.
[83] Although wild anger might be seen as a masculine expression of emotion, this lapse in restraint is generally reserved for villains and young, or immature, males in film. If we consider the Western, for example, it is either the inexperienced gunslinger or the soon-to-be-dead henchman who loses his temper under pressure, while the stoicism of the heroes portrayed by John Wayne and Clint Eastwood ensures their 'alpha male' status.
[84] Strikwerda and May, 'Male Friendship and Intimacy' in *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in Light of Feminism*, ed. Larry May et al. (1996), 89.
[85] Hopkins, 'Gender Treachery' in *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in Light of Feminism*, ed. Larry May et al. (1996), 98.
[86] Robert Strikwerda and Larry May, 'Male Friendship and Intimacy' (1996), 79-80.

In fact, this aversion to intimate friendship can perhaps be traced back to early American social science of the 1930s, which reinforced hegemonic masculinity and "proved" that a "liking for social gatherings" is a "predominantly female" characteristic, while "a spirit of adventure or independent" is more typically male.[87] Kimmel also notes that several early 20th century "child rearing manuals cautioned against dancing, book learning, and social gatherings, since they would corrupt" young boys and prevent "healthy male development."[88] Though these theories are now outdated, they nevertheless informed mainstream 20th century American masculinity: hegemonic, monolithic, and resistant to change. It would seem that men are not only supposed to distance themselves from domestic society, but society in general, as these early gender theories still cast a shadow over the present day, encouraging men and boys to seek adventure and independence, eschewing the feminization that may be caused by "social gatherings". This might explain why the phrase 'social butterfly' has a feminine association,[89] whereas 'lone wolf' almost always describes a solitary male. And if a man cannot create a physical distance, if he is compelled by various commitments and responsibilities to engage with society, he must at least rigorously maintain an emotional distance.

Thirty-two years before he won the 1976 Nobel Prize for Literature, Saul Bellow published his first novel in which Joseph, a young man in Chicago, waits to be drafted into the US

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[87] Kimmel quotes from the work of Lewis Terman, developer of the Stanford-Binet IQ test. Terman created "an inventory of gendered behaviours, attitudes, and information by which parents could plot their child's successful acquisition of a gendered identity." Kimmel, *The History of Men* (2005), 12.
[88] Kimmel, *The History of Men* (2005), 80.
[89] "Gradually, social butterfly has migrated into a descriptive term, mostly applied to females, who are extroverted, comfortable in social situations, can talk to just about anyone, and who seem to have a certain grace and ease at parties." Wise Geek, 'Social Butterfly,' accessed 15 August 2014, www.wisegeek.com.

Army during the Second World War. The novel takes the form of his personal journal kept between 15 December 1942 and 9 April 1943, and opens with a justification for such an emotionally expressive document – a justification that he finds necessary due to the prevailing anti-sensitivity of American masculinity in the 1940s, which he describes in the first paragraph:

> [T]his is an era of hardboiled-dom. Today, the code of the athlete, of the tough boy … that curious mixture of striving, asceticism, and rigour … is stronger than ever. Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. Do you have an inner life? It is nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them.[90]

Bellow's "hardboiled-dom" is strikingly similar to elements of the contemporary "Guy Code" with its normative standards of behaviour – a code to which men must strictly adhere. He even refers to this dominant opinion as a set of commandments: "If you have difficulties, grapple with them silently, goes one of the commandments. To hell with that! I intend to talk about mine..."[91] Though he sounds brave, there is a contradiction in Joseph's character in that he does not actually talk about his feelings. Instead, he writes about them in his private diary, rendering his defiant damning of the status quo rather feeble and setting himself up as another sort of 'underground man' – alienated and judgemental.

An exception that places the general trend of emotional restraint in sharp relief is sport. Whether he is positioned as player or spectator, sport is an arena in which hegemonic masculinity allows, and even encourages, less reserved displays of emotion. Kimmel observes that "[m]en use sports to both hide their feelings and to express their feelings. Sports

[90] Bellow, *Dangling Man* (1979), 1.
[91] Ibid.

legitimize our emotions…."[92] As long as men are vigorously involved in sport – on the field, or vigorously supporting – even the restrictions of normative homophobia are relaxed, allowing for "exceptions to these taboos, such as the pat on the backside of a teammate"[93] or the passionate embrace of supporters celebrating a winning goal.

Perhaps the ultimate form of masculine stoicism, man's refusal to communicate emotion, is silence. Joan Mellen explains that "the silence of the male hero in American films dates from *The Virginian* – ironically enough, from the beginnings of the sound film itself." The screen legend exerts a powerful influence over the masculinity imagined by mainstream culture. Mellen notes this even to the extent that the stars themselves begin to believe the myth of their onscreen personae and live them out.[94]

To speak is to risk error, to be vulnerable; whereas the guarded man maintains a position of power in his silence. The idea of power seized and retained through silence is supported by certain linguistic studies, such as Victoria DeFrancisco's 1991 study on conversational dominance, in which she found that men use silence as a means to gain control of a conversation.[95] Jennifer Coates, in her examination of gender differences in language, cites

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92 Kimmel, *Guyland* (2008), 129.
93 Strikwerda and May, 'Male Friendship and Intimacy' (1996), 88.
94 Mellen observes that the universal nature of the "silent leader" image has led to actors becoming "caricatures of their screen personae. 'It's just that I don't like to talk very much', Charles Bronson has said. 'Steve dislikes open emotions', McQueen's former wife has explained. 'He believes that the true nature of a man is how much he can feel without showing it'." Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves* (1978), 14.
95 Coates, *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language* (1993), 113. A filmic representation of this can be seen in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999) when Tom Cruise's character, Frank TJ Mackey, a hypermasculine life coach, begins to lose control of an interview. When the female interviewer begins to probe into his personal life, he simply shuts down, causing her to become agitated. After a long silence, she finally says, "Come on, Frank. What are you doing?" And he responds, "What am I doing? I'm quietly judging you."

Jack Sattel's 1983 paper, 'Men, Inexpressiveness, and Power', explaining how he "argues that silence is used by men as part of male dominance. He claims that male inexpressiveness is a method for achieving control in both mixed and all-male conversation."[96] This is seldom more true than in the milieu of the Western film, where the tougher the cowboy, the less he has to say about anything, or as Mellen explains: "On the cattle runs the true cowboy was supposed to eschew complaining, bragging, and lying. He was judged by how silently he could endure the rigors of his life."[97] This is related to the tough male hero who refuses to divulge critical information even under violent interrogation.[98] Unflinching endurance of suffering plays a vital role in the creation of a formidable masculine persona which may be demonstrated to other men. I will discuss this masochistic tendency in a little more detail later on.

A more sinister aspect of male silence is discussed by Kimmel, who states that the "culture of silence is a culture of complicity ... It's as strong an unwritten code as the police department's famed 'blue wall of silence', or the Mafia's infamous rule of 'omerta', or the secret rituals of the Masons."[99] This complicity often protects men who commit violent or otherwise criminal acts, due to a prevailing sentiment that to inform the authorities concerning a crime can be more dishonourable than the crime itself. Aside from the more organised examples listed above, Kimmel also cites several criminal cases where large groups of young male witnesses to violence and sexual assault remained silent. He explains how it

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[96] Ibid., 114.
[97] Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves* (1978), 13.
[98] Some of the most harrowing scenes of courageous refusal to speak, despite extreme torture, are depicted by these actors in the following films: George Clooney in *Syriana* (2005); Daniel Craig in *Casino Royale* (2006); Mel Gibson in *Payback* (1999); Sylvester Stallone in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985).
[99] Kimmel, *Guyland* (2008), 67.

begins in boyhood, noting that "[s]ilence is one of the ways boys *become* men."[100] The association of the informant, whistle-blower or snitch with cowardice and betrayal corresponds to a lack of manliness – or even humanity, if one considers the range of animals associated with this practice: canary, rat, weasel, snake, stool pigeon. There are, of course, some exceptions in Hollywood film representations, where a whistle-blower is set up as the heroic everyman defender of integrity and the rights of the individual, raging against a clearly evil system. *On the Waterfront* is a notable example, as Marlon Brando portrays Terry Malloy, a longshoreman confronting corrupt union bosses – a story that has been read as a justification of director Elia Kazan's own whistle-blowing, as he named names during the McCarthy-era communist witch hunt.[101]

There also seems to be a sense in which the ideal man compensates for silence through an escalation of action. Deed exceeds word on the masculinity scale. Mellen elaborates on this point with a fairly extreme statement: "To be silent best befits a man of action who scorns analysis, has few thoughts, and feels little need for the irrelevance of explanations; our heroes have never been intellectuals."[102]

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[100] "They learn not to say anything when guys make sexist comments to girls. They learn not to say anything when guys taunt or tease another guy, or start fights, or bully or torment a classmate or a friend." Ibid., 61-9.

[101] Regarding his personal identification with the Terry Malloy character, Kazan admits in his autobiography that the "connection did lend the tone of irrefutable anger to the scenes I photographed and to my work with actors. When Brando, at the end yells at Lee Cobb, the mob boss, 'I'm glad what I done – you hear me? – glad what I done!' that was me saying, with identical heat, that I was glad I'd testified as I had. … So when critics say I put my story and my feelings on the screen, to justify my informing, they are right." Kazan, *Elia Kazan: A Life* (1988), 500.

[102] Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves* (1978), 13.

Intellectualism is not embraced by hegemonic masculinity. In fact, it is often scorned as a characteristic of the unmanly. America, as a nation, has historically been suspicious of intellectuals. As early as 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson addressed a Harvard fraternity with his speech 'The American Scholar' in which he refers to "the sluggard intellect of this continent"[103] and observes that "[t]he mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself."[104] Also in the first half of the 19th century, pioneer heroes such as Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and Kit Carson were mythologised by various folk tales and biographies and all, according to Michael Kimmel, were characterised as "fiercely anti-intellectual."[105] Kimmel quotes Boone's biographer, Timothy Flint, who wrote that Boone "rather eschewed books, parchment deeds, and clerky contrivances as forms of evil."[106]

In the 20th century, it was Richard Hofstadter's trenchant work that explained the altered role of the intellectual in American society. In his 1964 Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* Hofstadter traces the shifting role of the American intellectual from founder to outcast:

> It is ironic that the United States should have been founded by intellectuals; for throughout most of our political history, the intellectual has been for the most part either an outsider, a servant, or a scapegoat.[107]

Not only does he identify the intellectual's isolation from mainstream society, positioned as outsider or scapegoat, but he also points to the gradual emasculation of the intellectual. Though it began as a patriarchal association of purity and moral virtue with the feminine,

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[103] Emerson, 'The American Scholar' in *Essays and Lectures* (1983), 53.
[104] Ibid., 70.
[105] Kimmel, *The History of Men* (2005), 232.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (2012), p145-6.

contrasted with masculine action and practical realities, Hofstadter asserts that it was "business, finally, that isolated and feminized culture by establishing the masculine legend that men are not concerned with the events of the intellectual and cultural world."[108] More recent publications along a similar line are evidence of American society's sustained rejection of the intellectual.[109] Mainstream culture in the United States esteems bravery, cunning, athleticism, financial success, and even good fortune, above intellectual achievement. Hegemonic masculinity expresses its mistrust of intellectuals through terms with an enfeebling implication; words such as egghead, bookworm, geek, and nerd are associated with weakness, anathema to masculinity. Kimmel notes among school boys that there is a tendency "to regard any sort of academic success as feminizing – notice how they pick on the nerds and geeks…"[110]

However, despite the general rule that any kind of academic achievement is a mark against a man's masculinity quotient, if he must achieve academically, it is preferable that it be in the fields of science or technology, which Connell notes "are culturally defined as a masculine realm,"[111] whereas the arts are linked to a kind of human empathy, or analysis of the emotional life, which again is unmanly outside of sport or war. It may even be that, to some extent, the repression of male emotion aims to foreground rational thinking, the kind of thinking associated with science and technology. It is important for men to be cool, rational, never at the mercy of their emotions. Connell clearly states the "familiar theme in patriarchal

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[108] Ibid., 50
[109] These books include Susan Jacoby's *The Age of American Unreason* published in 2008 and, for a more humorous take, Charles P. Pierce's *Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free* in 2009.
[110] Kimmel, *Guyland* (2008), 74.
[111] Connell, *Masculinities* (2005), 164.

ideology," that is, "men are rational while women are emotional," noting that it is a "deep-seated assumption in European philosophy … and it is widespread in popular culture."[112]

This manly reverence for rational thinking emphasises practical skills in the perpetual task of proving masculinity. And one of the most attractive and mythologised ways for a man to test his practical skills is in the wilderness – especially in terms of basic survival, such as building a shelter, making a fire, foraging and hunting for food. Hegemonic American masculinity has a strong association with the natural environment. Frederick Jackson Turner, the Harvard professor who was one of the first to write seriously about the role of the frontier in the history of American culture, is cited by Kimmel, claiming that the frontier "imbued [men with] a 'forest philosophy' that was anti-intellectual, anticonsumerist, and anti-European refinement."[113] The wild frontier is seen as a brutal, but necessary, arena in which intellectualism and refinement can be 'cured' through hardship at the mercy of the natural environment, thus creating more masculine men. Kimmel quotes George Evans: "The wilderness will take hold of you. It will give you good red blood; it will turn you from a weakling into a man."[114] And although this quotation is over a hundred years old, the sentiment endures in contemporary American masculinity, as evidenced by the popularity of men's weekend retreats into nature – "homosocial preserves"[115] where "middle-class white men" gather "[hoping] to tap into some primitive stream of masculinity," following a "mythopoetic call of the wild"[116] and appropriating Native American rituals, chants, and

[112] Ibid.
[113]Kimmel, *Manhood In America: A Cultural History* (2006), 61.
[114] Ibid., 61.
[115] Ibid., 207.
[116] Ibid., 208.

dances, in order to access "that set of emotions – community, spirituality, communion with nature."[117]

The act of hunting combines a survivalist test of manhood, the "mythopoetic call of the wild" and a sense of competition that arises from killing an animal – especially one larger and stronger than a man. As Kimmel notes, "Hunting experienced a renaissance at the turn of the century." Just as modern beef farming became industrialised and hunting was no longer a matter of survival, "it returned as recreation and fantasy in the proving of manhood."[118] As the activity is no longer strictly necessary, hunting as recreation, as a game or a sport, takes on a stronger symbolic value. The contemporary American man is driven to hunt, not out of hunger, but out of sheer desire, a desire that can be assimilated into an identity. Approximately "12.5 million people 16 years old and older enjoyed hunting a variety of animals within the United States" in 2006. With 91% of American hunters being male,[119] the sport remains a predominantly male activity, although these figures are shifting in recent years.[120]

This desire to hunt might, in some sense, stem from a more general propensity for violence. Victor Seidler in his chapter 'Masculinity and Violence' quotes Anne-Marie Fearon: "… males in particular tend to grow up arrogant, insensitive, alienated and, above all, violent."[121]

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117 Ibid., 210.
118 Kimmel, *The History of Men* (2005), 54.
119 Ogle, 'Women Hunters,' accessed 15 August 2014, www.womenhunters.com.
120 Statistics show a sharp rise in female hunters over the past several years. Weisberg, 'Hunting: Despite overall decline in license sales, more women are taking up hunting,' in *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 11 November 2007, accessed 15 August 2014, www.post-gazette.com.
121 Seidler, 'Masculinity and Violence' in *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in Light of Feminism*, ed. Larry May et al. (1996), 63.

Kimmel describes the phenomenon as something especially American, expressing the notion quite amusingly:

> It's as American as apple pie. Resorting to violence to restore one's honor from perceived humiliations has been around ever since one caveman chided another on the size of his club, but few modern societies have made violence such a cultural and psychological foundation.[122]

"[T]he common feature of the dominant forms of contemporary masculinity is that manhood is equated with having some sort of power [and this power] is seen as power over something or someone else."[123] Michael Kaufman's definition of power implies comparison and competition. Power not exerted through domination is no power at all by the standards of hegemonic masculinity. Man's power must be displayed through control over other people, his environment, and himself.

The role of violence in the creation of a masculine identity is a crucial point, and one I intend to discuss in greater detail with reference to *Taxi Driver*. For now, it is sufficient to note its significance and observe that violence is not an end in itself. It serves an even greater compulsion in the heart of man, a desire instilled by mainstream masculinity: the unending pursuit of ever-increasing degrees of power.

The beginning of the nineteenth century saw the great rise of capitalism in America, an economic system that was almost immediately carved into the national identity, which naturally influenced the personal identity of American men. The highly competitive capitalist

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122 Kimmel, *Guyland* (2008), 56.
123 Kaufman, 'Men, Feminism, and Men's Contradictory Experiences of Power' in *Theorizing Masculinities*, ed. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (1994), 145.

market led to new freedom, as well as new anxiety, for the individual, creating an ideal environment for what Kimmel calls the "Self-Made Man,"[124] a man whose masculine identity was defined by "success in the market, individual achievement, mobility, wealth."[125] In a capitalist system, power is largely defined by economic power. Men are encouraged to find their identity in their careers and salaries leading to "endless striving," the "great scramble in which all are troubled and none are satisfied."[126] And it is in this system where men must dominate each other financially in order to prove their masculinity. In terms of his environment, a man must not only be connected to the wilderness as mentioned earlier, he must dominate it. The wilderness is an arena for proving masculinity, but can also be set up as an opponent, a force to be tamed and harnessed. The aforementioned American pioneers Kit Carson, Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett were soon mythologised as heroes of "innate, instinctual manhood. All three were in constant retreat from advancing civilisation."[127]

Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* is the first of his three-volume study devoted to a comprehensive survey of American mythology, its ideological nature and its role in shaping the national character. In his discussion of Daniel Boone in the chapter 'Narrative into Myth' he explains the emergence of Boone as a national hero through John Filson's novelistic treatment of the frontier mythology.[128]

> [Filson employs] an imagistic connection between the state of Boone's mind and the state of the real landscape. … It begins with a total immersion of Boone in an experience of the wilderness, continues with his tasting both the promise and the

[124] Kimmel, *Manhood In America* (2006), 13.
[125] Ibid., 17.
[126] Kimmel cites Francis Grund's 1837 book, *The Americans*. Ibid.
[127] Ibid., 43
[128] Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (1996), 292.

> terror of the Indian's world, and culminates in his achievement of a deeper perception of the nature of the wilderness and of his own soul and his assertion of rational control over his environment.[129]

The mythical frontiersman made his way through the harsh natural environment, eschewing the comforts of civilisation, and yet ironically his "very activity in moving west to escape civilisation transforms [him] into culture's advance guard [taming] the West for future settlement."[130] There is a paradox in man's relationship with nature: he must both love its wildness, and tame it.

But it is not only his environment that must be tamed. It is the man himself, his own body. Men's power must be expressed publicly due to the necessarily homosocial nature of demonstrations "performed for the evaluative eyes of other men."[131] And one of the most public ways a man can display the power of self-control is with his body. "Men's bodies have long been symbols of masculinity in America. They reveal (or at least they signify), manhood's power, strength, and self-control." Even though extreme physical strength is no longer essential to survival, "its association with masculinity remains as firm as ever."[132] In fact, it is all about the aesthetic, the simulacrum; the appearance of strength or manliness is more important than actual manliness. This is particularly evident in the increased use of steroids – college-aged men being the "primary consumers." "Steroids enable men to increase muscle mass quickly and dramatically so that they look incredibly big." However, among the well-known side-effects of prolonged use, including outbursts of rage, is "a

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[129] Ibid., 293.
[130] Kimmel, *Manhood In America* (2006), 43.
[131] Ibid., 224.
[132] Ibid.

significant shrinkage of the testicles."[133] Men are willing to make almost any sacrifice in order to win the approval of those men for whom they perform their masculinity.

Hegemonic American masculinity is a kind of suit that men wear in order to conform to gender hegemony – the only system by which they might be affirmed as men by a jury of their peers and potentially be perceived as superior. For some men this might be as comfortable as wearing a suit – for others, perhaps, it is more of a straightjacket, or even a hair shirt. This view of masculine performance, however, assumes that the man desires to conform to, and be accepted by, his society and its normative values.

It is for this reason that the outsider is such an interesting subject. His is a masculinity stripped bare of so many of the qualities required by hegemonic American masculinity, as well as the media channels through which those requirements are stipulated. He has no social validation, no competition with other men by whom he may measure himself, no women upon whom to demonstrate his virility, no progeny, no power in the form of wealth or influence, and he is not necessarily anti-intellectual. The solitary man is interesting as a scientific control of sorts. In the sociological experiments and surveys conducted to discover mainstream values in American masculinity, the nature of the man cut off from society is essential to meaningful comparison.

It could be that due to this restriction of avenues available through which he might express his masculinity, the other forms of masculinity become exaggerated. He might exhibit a

[133] Legal prescriptions for steroids doubled between 1997 and 2002. Kimmel, *Manhood In America* (2006), 223.

more concentrated strain of the masculine traits open to him, in a way that is similar to the kind of hypermasculinity that occurs in prison or in the military, where there are also lacunae in the spectrum of masculine expressions. Because the outsider – whether in the wilderness or the crowded city – is limited to non-social expression, I propose that there is a compensatory effect that causes him to be more silent, more stoical, and exhibit more risk-taking behaviour than men who have stronger social connections. I will attempt to demonstrate this theory with reference to the primary texts, and their role in determining the kind of American mainstream masculinity that men measure themselves by.

Outsider in the Outdoors: The Fringe Masculinity of Christopher McCandless

The Legacy of Thoreau

"He cultivated his own wildness." — Ethel Seybold

Almost in opposition to the *lonely* man, alienated from the society into which he longs to gain entry, both history and fiction present us with another character: the solitary man. He is a man accepted by society – in some cases he is even esteemed as one who conforms to standards commonly thought to be features of success, such as wealth, charm, and education. Despite its view of him, however, the crucial point is that the solitary man rejects society and its values. He usually compensates for this rejection with an especially high regard for nature: The more he despises society, the more he tends to love the natural environment.

Henry David Thoreau was instrumental in a quite radical transformation in the American view of the natural environment. His ideas and actions are not merely a parallel or precedent to the life of Christopher McCandless; through his writing, Thoreau was a profound influence on the young man and his experience of 'wilderness'. Born in 1817, Thoreau was educated at Harvard. The two years he spent alone in a cabin near Walden pond, "a mile

from any neighbor,"[134] were described by Brooks Atkinson, in his introduction to the 1937 Random House edition of *Walden*, as "the most dramatic thing he ever did,"[135] since much of Thoreau's life was spent writing, lecturing, or in the cultured company of the Concord transcendentalists, led by his friend and sometime mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

In spite of his comparatively tame life, Thoreau's ideas were an important influence on Christopher McCandless, who, having freshly graduated with honours from Emory University, spurned family, friends, and society as a whole, in the name of adventure – a young man whose life was cut short after 113 days of living alone in the Alaskan wilderness. He died in August 1992. He was 24 years old. His story might have been lost among the many tragic news articles about men who perish in the harsh conditions of the forty-ninth state had it not been for Jon Krakauer's national bestselling biography, *Into the Wild*, which Sean Penn adapted into a film of the same title in 2007. These works, and the original magazine article by Krakauer, have turned McCandless into a cult icon, representing freedom, non-conformity, and a fearless quest for a profound wilderness experience.

A common thread that I would like to lift out, trace to its beginning and follow to its end, is the dissent shared by these two men – their rebellion against a foundational tenet of almost every society in history – by embracing that condition which has both fascinated and threatened man since the time of Genesis when God said, "It is not good for man to be alone."[136] By embracing solitude they do not merely deviate from the mainstream; they question the necessity for any stream at all. By embracing the wilderness, they undermine the

[134] Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 3.
[135] Atkinson, introduction to *Walden* by HD Thoreau (1937), xi.
[136] Genesis 2:18

value of the established order. It must be pointed out, however, that this sentiment is not entirely true, or equally true, of both men. Thoreau certainly did not question the value of society, at least not the notion of society in its ideal form, and McCandless relied quite heavily on support from society in order to sustain his life on its margins, until he chose to cut himself off completely which led to his death.

As much as they challenge the sovereign necessity of society, neither of them effects a complete denunciation of its value. That is, although they are sometimes branded as such, neither of them is actually a hermit. The term is unduly ascribed to them by a society seemingly indignant at their dissent. They do not plunge themselves into abject isolation for the rest of their natural lives, as did the desert fathers and other true hermits. However, they do gain something from the association – albeit of questionable value and only by virtue of an underserved label. They gain masculine capital. Through their connection to eremitism, their masculine quotient is increased without having to undergo the physical and mental austerity of complete isolation from society. That leads to the focus question for this chapter: How does the solitude of Christopher McCandless – his withdrawal from society and commitment to wilderness – affect the way his masculinity is portrayed and interpreted through the various literary and cinematic texts?

My approach in exploring this question will be to draw, initially, on a brief discussion of Henry David Thoreau – primarily as represented through his singular work, *Walden*. And then, having established his legacy and influence as a foundation, I will analyse Christopher McCandless in terms of his characterisation in the book and film, *Into the Wild*. Though McCandless is my primary subject, the role of Thoreau cannot be ignored – both in the

actual life of the young man and in the way his life is interpreted culturally and through the media.

In a brief essay on the legacy of Henry David Thoreau, EB White suggests that the man "has probably been more wildly misconstrued than any other person of comparable literary stature."[137] Though he gained a reputation for being a hermit and a naturalist, White asserts that he was neither. Instead he describes him as something else altogether.

> He was a poseur … but the pose was struck not for other people to study but for *him* to study – a brave and ingenious device for a creative person to adopt. He posed for himself and was both artist and model, examining his own position in relation to nature and society with the most patient and appreciative care.[138]

It is perhaps strange that a man who devoted so much of his work to introspection, to mining out and extrapolating from the deep truths about himself, should be so misunderstood by his readers – devotees and critics alike. One of the more obvious reasons Thoreau has been "wildly misconstrued" is that he is defined by a book that is exceedingly difficult to define. With a definitive work that defies classification, there is the danger of the author, or his writing, being employed selectively to support any theory at all. And so it is important to acknowledge the complexity of both the man and his body of work in order to understand how they relate to Christopher McCandless – his solitude and masculinity.

One of the fundamental paradoxes of Thoreau's thinking is perhaps his particular form of primitivism. He was not advocating an obviously impossible "return to the static

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137 White, 'A Slight Sound at Evening' in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Walden: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ruland, ed. (1968), 113.
138 Ibid.

timelessness and unconsciousness of primitive existence," rather, as Sherman Paul explains, Thoreau's primitiveness "was at best a symbol of the need for an organic life, one whose functions grew out of law, and it asked more of man than 'civilization' did: that he live by his highest consciousness, that he transform a physical communion with nature into a spiritual one."[139] For Thoreau, a return to nature meant the achievement of a higher form of consciousness. This is something he also wrestled with personally, as he confessed to Mrs Lucy Jackson Brown (Emerson's sister-in-law) that despite his apparent quiet bookishness, he was in fact "[growing] savager and savager every day ... and [his] tameness [was] only the repose of untamableness." He wanted to be "nature looking into nature," and said, "from some such recess I would put forth sublime thoughts daily, as the plant puts forth leaves."[140] This reverse anthropomorphic image expresses his desire to decentralise the human perspective when thinking and writing about nature, anticipating and perhaps influencing the more formalised "inhumansim" of authors such as Robinson Jeffers. And yet most of Thoreau's writing is distinctly personal, often using nature and natural elements to explore human truths – with himself as the principal human explored.

Though he wrote a great deal about himself, he certainly did not write chiefly for himself. *Walden* is a record of his thought life designed to influence many other thought lives. Interestingly, this leads to another paradox, the paradox of making the humanist view normative. Thoreau calls all men to follow his way, which is for each man to follow his own way. With reference to a young man who said that he would like to live in a similar way to himself, Thoreau explains his view on autonomy:

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[139] Paul, *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration* (1972), 230.
[140] Thoreau, *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau* (1958), 77.

> I would not have any one adopt my mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own way*, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead.[141]

Though alone, he engaged the world – not to follow him, but to pursue independence and self-realisation. McCandless, of course, is an example of someone who both followed Thoreau and carved his own trail. An important point here is that Thoreau's separation from society was not total. He was communicating with society both in writing and through personal visits, and yet he earned a reputation for being a hermit.[142] Even Emerson was among those who mislabelled him.[143] Though he never married, and his romantic affiliations were brief, rare and seemingly dispassionate, he nevertheless had a deep affection for people. He had many friends[144] and considered himself quite social, setting the record straight as it were in the opening lines of the *Walden* chapter, 'Visitors':

> I think that I love society as much as most, and am ready enough to fasten myself like a bloodsucker for a time to any full-blooded man that comes in my way. I am naturally no hermit, but might possibly sit out the sturdiest frequenter of the bar-room, if my business called me thither.[145]

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141 Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 63-4.

142 The following texts make reference to his reputation as a hermit: Seybold, *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics* (1951), 9; Moldenhauer, 'The Extra-vagant Maneuver: Paradox in *Walden*' (1968), 77; White 'A Slight Sound at Evening' (1968), 113. The latter two both appear in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Walden: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ruland, ed. (1968).

143 Emerson considered him a hermit. Paul, *The Shores of America* (1972),180.

144 Actually, Thoreau was a man of many friendships. First and foremost were the members of his own family. The closeness of his ties with them is emphasised in his letters. Both his sisters and his parents always spoke of him as a most devoted brother and son.
Second, he had a large number of intellectual companions, particularly among the Transcendentalists. His friendship with Emerson is well known. He was on even closer terms of intimacy with Ellery Channing, who accompanied him on his daily walks." Harding, *A Thoreau Handbook* (1959),151.

145 Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 127.

And yet a few chapters later in 'Brute neighbours' he calls himself "Hermit" and gives the name "Poet" to his friend and sometime fishing companion, William Ellery Channing, in what is probably a fictionalised version of the kind of conversation they would have.[146] The word hermit is italicised and has a full stop isolating it from the rest of the text. When the Poet leaves the Hermit to go digging for bait, he is identified as "*Hermit alone*." It seems Thoreau is wryly mocking his own reputation, even engaging in some self-parody when he has the Hermit offer mystic reflections such as "Shall I go to heaven or a-fishing?"[147] Harding summarises Thoreau's attitude towards eremitism rather well:

> In *Walden* particularly Thoreau made much of his desire for solitude. But one must be careful not to think him antisocial. When he traveled through the Maine woods and discovered true hermits living miles from any neighbor, he was appalled. He wanted merely to be able to be alone when he felt the need to be by himself, not to dwell in complete solitude.[148]

As I showed in my introduction to masculinity, men become the men they are because of other men. Their masculinity is performed for a male audience – especially geared towards the approval of an alpha male, or men they admire. And in the case of Thoreau, that was Ralph Waldo Emerson, his sometime mentor, long-time benefactor, and on-again-off-again friend. A discussion of Thoreau's masculinity would therefore be incomplete without some mention of his relationship to Emerson.

As Norman Foerster explains in his essay entitled 'The Intellectual Heritage of Thoreau', the simple fact that he was fifteen years younger than Emerson is "a kind of major premise

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146 Ibid., 201-2.
147 Ibid., 202.
148 Harding, *A Thoreau Handbook* (1959), 151.

never to be lost sight of in a study of his inner life."[149] Through Emerson, Thoreau was granted a vicarious experience of spiritual struggle, a resigned pastorate, and being the subject of "widespread scandal" – "almost without a pang."[150] Foerster contends that he gained the "advantage of the experience; he received the benefit without the labor – he inherited Trancendentalism."[151]

Though it is difficult to say whether Thoreau would have arrived at his fierce individualism without the influence of Emerson's anti-conformist thinking, lucidly expressed in his essay 'Self-Reliance', finding like-minded men among the Transcendentalists of Concord could only have bolstered his resolve. Of course the two men did not always agree. Emerson, for example, did not approve of Thoreau's Walden experiment,[152] which seemed too much as though solitude was an end in itself and made independence too "easy." As he wrote in 'Self-Reliance':

> It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.[153]

The right kind of solitude, for Emerson, was more the nurturing of an independent state of mind, rather than physical isolation from society. And so perhaps Thoreau's thinking was shaped not only through his initial alliance to Emersonian transcendentalism, but his

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149 Foerster, 'The Intellectual Heritage of Thoreau' in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Walden: A Collection of Critical Essays* , ed. Richard Ruland (1968), 34.
150 Ibid.
151 Ibid.
152 Paul, *The Shores of America* (1972), 180.
153 Emerson, 'Self-Reliance' in *Essays and Lectures* (1983), 263.

eventual reaction against it, which paradoxically fits the mantra of the nonconformist. He rebelled even against a group which prized righteous rebellion.

Another aspect of this independence is that Emerson chooses to style his ideas on individualism as particularly masculine – especially in the essay 'Self-Reliance'. On several occasions in the essay, Emerson suggests that society and conformity carry a feminising quality that threatens the masculinity of every man. He claims, for example, that "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members."[154] He defines the feminine nature of this conspiracy more clearly in this quotation:

> It is easy enough for a firm man who knows the world to brook the rage of the cultivated classes. Their rage is decorous and prudent, for they are timid as being very vulnerable themselves. But when to their feminine rage the indignation of the people is added … it needs the habit of magnanimity and religion to treat it godlike as a trifle of no concernment.[155]

Of course it is not simply the characterisation of society's rage as "feminine" that makes ignoring it, for Emerson, the proper course of action. It is also the associated timidity, decorousness, and threat to man's independence that make society and their rage of no concern to real men. In fact, Walter Harding asserts, more generally, that "radicalness and resistance are essential parts of the American tradition."[156] Rebellion, in this sense, is a kind of default mode for the American man. Passivity is scorned. Acquiescence to popular opinion, to all that is mainstream, is to be actively rejected. Harding quotes from Henry Adams's *Education*:

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[154] Ibid., 261.
[155] Ibid., 264-265.
[156] Harding, *A Thoreau Handbook* (1959), 120.

> Resistance to something was the law of New England nature; the boy looked out on the world with the instinct of resistance; for numberless generations his predecessors had viewed the world chiefly as a thing to be reformed, filled with evil forces to be abolished.[157]

This rejection of society, and especially its "feminine" qualities, clearly complies with the constant repudiation of the feminine, which is so fundamental to hegemonic American masculinity. And in the case of Emerson's transcendentalism, it would seem that this repudiation is vital to man's self-reliance and self-determination – both of which are intricately bound up in his masculine identity.

Another formative aspect of Thoreau's identity was his work. Although it is not fashionable to conflate the author and his work, Thoreau himself had no such qualms about taking man and work together. He regarded Walter Raleigh as an ideal masculine writer. Sherman Paul neatly collates Thoreau's admiration for the author:

> Here was a man with "a healthy and able body to back his wits," who used the pen as he would an ax or a sword. "The whole man sat down to the writing of his books," Thoreau said, "not some curious brain only" … writing for him was "a stalwart man's work," the labor of a man with "marrow in his back, and a tendon Achilles in his heel." Raleigh's writing, therefore, was related to his manhood as assuredly as the "natural emphasis in his style [to] a man's tread …."[158]

This attitude shows not only Thoreau's conception of the inextricability of writing and the masculine identity of the writer, but it also reveals, as Paul observes, that Thoreau used this association of work and the written word to "[enable] him to defend his own literary calling as a heroic activity."[159] Viewed through the lens of labour, writing was no Ambrose Philips-

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157 Ibid.
158 Paul, *The Shores of America* (1972), 136.
159 Ibid.

type activity; instead it took on a macho, almost heroic quality – not far removed from swinging an axe.

Harding goes on to say that it is the sensuous nature of Thoreau's writing that engages the reader, and again quotes from his journal: "My body is all sentient … As I go here or there, I am tickled by this or that I come in contact with, as if touched by the wires of a battery."[160] For Harding, this style invites the reader to "see, hear, smell, and taste vicariously through Thoreau,"[161] and finally, contrasting the two great Concord transcendentalists, he writes, "Emerson gives us abstract ideas; Thoreau makes us experience."[162]

And yet these experiences are generally not wildly exotic encounters. One may assume that the majority of Thoreau readers have walked in a forest, smelled the scent of pine needles, watched the sun rise to the sound of birdsong. It is not so much the novelty of his experiences, but the freshness of his perspective that captivates the reader. His gift was to see things as if for the first time, and then capture that sensation in language. Seybold explains this with reference to Thoreau's reverence for first-hand, unique experiences:

> He believed that the truest accounts of things were given by those who saw them first, and for that reason he enjoyed the early naturalists, explorers, and travelers. Within himself he tried to feel the sensations of earlier man and earlier times. He cultivated his own wildness.[163]

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160 Harding, *A Thoreau Handbook* (1959), 133. [quoting from Thoreau, *Journals VIII*, 44.]
161 Ibid., 132.
162 Ibid., 134.
163 Seybold, *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics* (1951), 11. [quoting from Thoreau, *Writings.,* XV, 232; journal of January 27, 1857.]

Perhaps it is this self-styled wildness that so distinguishes him from the rest of the American literary canon. He sought not only to explore and appreciate wildness; he was determined to protect it. From the wildness of Walden, the forest, and the pond, to the wildness of his own soul, he recognised it as something that could not possibly thrive when subject to the civilising forces of society. And though he could not protect the greater American 'wilderness', he endeavoured to nurture that feral quality peculiar to himself – a duty he achieved through psychological, and often physical, separation from societal influence, as well as a conscious decision to support and encourage his personal wildness. This was by no means a licentious surrender to primal urges – Thoreau might even be considered a prude[164] – instead, it was a fierce defence of an attitude, a kind of primal lens through which he could commune with nature on terms that were not dictated by society's view of progress. It was, as Seybold's phrase so aptly suggests, an agricultural undertaking – possibly the great subterranean work of his artistic life.

But his dissociation from the cultural mores of New England society, his rejection of certain aspects of "civilisation" in favour of exploring a kind of primal truth, allowed him to change with the vicissitudes of the seasons. Since he was not altogether bound to the more gradual shifts of social custom and tradition, or the responsibility of a wife and family, he could afford to pursue truth wherever it led him. The Thoreau of literature is therefore distinctly protean in nature. Joseph Moldenhauer, in his essay 'The Extra-vagant Maneuver: Paradox in *Walden*,' warns us not to confuse the narrator persona of *Walden* with the "surveyor and

[164] Walter Harding writes that he had a "Victorian sense of morality. At times he was a prig." Harding, *A Thoreau Handbook* (1959), 119.

pencil-maker of Concord" and goes on to explain the array of personas taken on by the author.

> The narrator is a man of various moods and rhetorical stances, among them the severe moralist, the genial companion, the bemused "hermit," and the whimsical trickster who regards his experiment as a sly joke on solid citizens. ... In all his roles he conveys a sense of his uniqueness, the separateness of his vision from that of his townsmen.[165]

This "separateness" is precisely what I wish to explore in the next section of this chapter: Thoreau's profound separation from society runs much deeper than two years of living in moderate isolation. He is such an anomaly that, despite his best efforts to explore and express himself, it is rather unsurprising that he has been so "wildly misconstrued." And if we return to Emerson's cogent essay on independence of spirit, perhaps we will find that it is not merely unsurprising, but to be expected.

> Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.[166]

While most men of legendary solitude disappear into the woods "never to be heard from again," Thoreau returned from the forest, as if with a sprig, and proclaimed a new way of living. Not only did he spend a great deal of his time alone in nature, recording his private thoughts and observations, but, unlike many men of this persuasion, he also sought to explain and even promote his solitary lifestyle to others. It is as if he loved society enough to return to it and recommend that it be disbanded, or at least have its bonds loosened enough

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165 Moldenhauer, 'The Extra-vagant Maneuver: Paradox in *Walden*' in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Walden: A Collection of Critical Essays* , ed. Richard Ruland (1968), 77.
166 Emerson, 'Self-Reliance' (1984), 265.

to allow all men to experience the fierce individualism and private contemplation he valued so highly.

Of course, the private contemplation he valued was never an end in itself – it was employed in his relentless pursuit of truth, a pursuit that often drew him into nature, often away from society, and always into himself. Truth is by its very nature divisive. And Thoreau knew this, which is why he was not surprised that his elevation of principles above relationships resulted in his isolation from society. In 'Civil Disobedience', he explains:

> Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the *individual*, separating the diabolical in him from the divine.[167]

Here we see that Thoreau had already accepted not only his internal conflict, his personal paradoxes and "doubleness,"[168] but also separation from society, or at least from its general approval. While unity is a natural consequence of compromise, separation inevitably follows truth-seeking. And Thoreau clearly states his preference for the latter when he writes in the 'Conclusion' chapter of *Walden*: "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth."[169] Even as early as his college year, he wrote of social compliance as "a very silly thing," regarding "the forms of society useless, a sacrifice to politeness of 'truth, sincerity and candor…'." However, this was not simply boyish truculence; he goes on to explain that he

[167] Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 643 (author's emphasis).
[168] Ibid., 122
[169] Ibid., 294

would not "wantonly rend the meanest tie that binds him to his fellows." Rather, it was a conviction to adhere to what he calls "the stern demands of Truth."[170]

For Thoreau, the pursuit of truth was the defining aspect of "the superior man," a man "not content with the common reasons for things…. The superior man is a truth seeker, Melville's deep-diver."[171] As one who distinguished himself from the rest of society through his uncompromising truth quest, Thoreau could regard himself, according to his own standards, as superior to other men, a man with power. Even though his contemporary society did not consider him especially powerful, he did not trouble himself with the democratic view. Instead he believed that "any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already."[172] This overriding sense of personal power in spite of society's disparagement is crucial to understanding Thoreau's particular brand of masculinity, as well as his influence on Christopher McCandless.

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[170] Paul, *The Shores of America* (1972), 29. Paul quotes from Thoreau's college essays with a reference to Sanborn's *Life of Henry David Thoreau*. The quotation, however, was omitted by Sanborn; cf. Edwin Moser's 'Henry David Thoreau: the College Essays' (unpublished master's thesis, New York University, 1951), 171.
[171] Ibid. Again, Paul is quoting from Sanborn's *Life*.
[172] Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 645.

Dissolving into the Frame

"It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue … but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look…" — HD Thoreau

> In April 1992, a young man from a well-to-do East Coast family hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone into the wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. Four months later his decomposed body was found by a party of moose hunters.[173]

These stark, startling facts are the opening lines of Jon Krakauer's account of Christopher Johnson McCandless – his life and death. In a sense, the most significant thing about McCandless's adventure is that he did not survive it. The tragic story, in summary, is that soon after he graduated from Emory University in 1990, having majored in history and anthropology, McCandless turned from his upper-middle-class background and academic success, gave his life savings ($24,000) to charity, abandoned his car and possessions, and set out on a two-year cross-country journey that took him west from Atlanta to the streets of Las Vegas, north to Montana and South Dakota, down to Arizona, he canoed into Mexico, crawled back up to California, spent some time on the outskirts of Salton City, and many other place across the map. He took on occasional jobs, but generally survived off the kindness of strangers, his own resourcefulness, and the fact that his ascetic lifestyle had very few requirements. He travelled under the name Alexander Supertramp and described himself as "an aesthetic voyager whose home is the road."[174]

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[173] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), ix.
[174] Ibid.

In April 1992, however, he reached his final destination: the Alaskan wilderness, "the place many Americans take to be the ultimate home of more-than-human reality."[175] He lived in an abandoned bus parked along the Stampede Trail near Denali National Park. For 113 days, he survived off the land by hunting, poaching, and finding edible plants. But in September of that year, his body was found in his sleeping bag inside the bus. He died of starvation, weighing approximately 38kg at the time of his death. In one of his final diary entries, after two years of solo travel, he finally confessed to being lonely. Trapped in the wilderness by a high-flowing river, and moved by a Boris Pasternak passage, he wrote, "HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED," in the margin of *Doctor Zhivago*, the last book he would ever read.[176]

The fact that he did not return safely from his journey, that he instead died alone in the Alaskan wilderness, has allowed a young man and his travels to be transformed by various artistic interpretations into a symbol representing the unyielding pursuit of personal truth and freedom. The artistic representations of his life include literature, film, and music – key examples of which will be discussed in this chapter in order to explore and analyse the particular brand of solitary masculinity McCandless has come to stand for. Jon Krakauer, a literary journalist, wrote one of the first articles on McCandless for *Outside* magazine in January 1993, and helped turn him into a cult icon when he developed the article into an intensely researched and evocatively written book called *Into the Wild*, which was published in 1996 and went on to sell millions of copies in the U.S alone. The book spent 119 straight weeks on the New York Bestseller list and has been printed in 28 languages.[177] It is the

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175 Slovic, 'The spirit of these rocks and water' in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors (2009), 375.
176 Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 188.
177 'About Carine,' Carine McCandless, accessed 30 June 2013, www.carinemccandless.com.

source of my summary above and the basis of a film released in 2007 with the same title, directed by Sean Penn who also wrote the screenplay.[178] In a 2007 article for National Geographic Adventure, mountaineer and author, David Roberts notes:

> [N]ot long after *Into the Wild* was published, the bus became a shrine, to Krakauer's disbelief. It remains so 11 years later, as hundreds of pilgrims – including some who scorn McCandless as a screwup – annually make their way by snow machine, ATV, mountain bike, or on foot to the bus. There, they camp out, take pictures, muse upon Chris and his fate, and record their thoughts in makeshift registers that now stretch to multiple volumes. [179]

McCandless devotees who make the pilgrimage to Fairbanks 142, the abandoned bus which Chris called the "magic bus,"[180] mark their journey with photographs, carve names and dates into the bus, and write thoughts in a shared journal – several of which are transcribed in an essay by Sherry Simpson, which originally appeared in the *Anchorage Press* in 2002.[181] This is interesting because what was essentially a solitary experience for McCandless has become a shared experience for those he inspired. People not only record their own thoughts, but read the thoughts of others. And the Internet has played a vital role in facilitating and developing

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178 All references to actions/dialogue in the motion picture *Into the Wild* (2007) [written and directed by Sean Penn, based on the book by Jon Krakauer], are from the DreamWorks Pictures, 2008 DVD edition.

179 Roberts quotes from the makeshift register: "His monument and tomb are a living truth whose flame will light the 'way of dreams' in other's lives," [and] "Alex [Supertramp], you have inspired me and changed my life forever. If only more were like you." National Geographic, accessed 15 August 2014, www.nationalgeographic.com.

180 'Christopher McCandless Bio,' Christopher McCandless, accessed 15 August 2014, www.christophermccandless.info.

181 These quotations include the following two: "Like Chris, I came to Alaska looking for some answers as I near my last year in college. A very emotional day and a highlight of my summer up here in the wild land of Alaska. Constant thoughts of my family and friends."
"I started my journey here hoping two things. 1) somewhere out there I would find myself 2) that I would find some hope for the future. Now I am here at the bus and I am happy because the future looks up. And I know who I am. Now it's time to go home to the ones I love and help bring truth to the light." Simpson also records several other examples of men who died in the Alaskan wilderness. 'I Want to Ride in the Bus Chris Died in.' *The Anchorage Press*, 13 February 2002, accessed 15 August 2014, web.archive.org

this kind of communal experience. There are a variety of online tributes – perhaps most notably a comprehensive website, created by Adam Read in order to "keep this great story alive," which attempts to collate multiple aspects of McCandless and his impact into a single source.[182] Other responses are more artistic, such as the folk song "dedicated to the ideals and values [McCandless] embodied," composed and performed by Etienne LeBel. The song provides the soundtrack to a photographic montage of McCandless at various points in his life, which the artist posted as a video on Youtube. It has accumulated over 1.5 million views since April 2008.[183] LeBel writes in the video description: "Although I've never met the man, I've been deeply touched by his spirit," and the overwhelmingly positive viewer response indicates that his sentiments are not unique. Another more recent example is by French singer, Alain Cornu, who wrote a song called "L'hôtel des adieux", which he composed as a tribute to the memory of Christopher McCandless. He travelled from Marseille via several major cities to play his song, as well as a cover of "Society" from the soundtrack of *Into the Wild*,[184] at Fairbanks 142. His journey is documented in a video and a blog.[185]

McCandless's sister, Carine, is also an important part of his legacy. She consulted on both the book and the film, and later became a motivational speaker. She refers to the principles her brother lived out in several of her lectures, which espouse truth, freedom, and an

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182 Amongst other material, the site has links to Krakauer's book, the film adaptation, Ron Lamothe's documentary, the memorial foundation, essays on McCandless, and a discussion forum with thousands of posts. 'Christopher McCandless,' accessed 15 August 2014, www.christophermccandless.info.
183 Youtube, accessed 15 August 2014, www.youtube.com.
184 Ibid.
185 The video is located at www.youtube.com and the blog is called Happiness Road happinessroad.wordpress.com. Accessed 15 August 2014.

experience of nature, while warning against conformity and materialism.[186] She explains in one lecture: "Chris wrote himself a beautiful story, but did not survive to tell it." And so many others, including Carine, have taken up the role of storyteller,[187] and together they have turned him into a "literary icon … whose life story has captured the hearts of millions of people around the world."[188]

There is, however, another factor that has maintained the cultural influence of Chris McCandless, besides the emotive nature of his narrative, the voices of his storytellers, and the sense of community among his devotees. It is, in fact, controversy that has kept his story vital. Though I have focused, at first, on the fans, the response to the McCandless story has been extremely divergent – his detractors as passionate as any supporters. Krakauer mentions the vitriol of early critics who read his first article, and "fulminated that he was a reckless idiot, a wacko, a narcissist who perished out of arrogance and stupidity – and was undeserving of the considerable media attention he received."[189] Many subsequent articles, including Sherry Simpson's essay and Michael Power's 'The Cult of Chris McCandless' in *Men's Journal*, have given voice to the critical and dismissive view that dominates among Alaskan locals. Though there may, of course, be many who feel more ambivalent about McCandless, extreme views tend to be emphasised in the media, and particularly online, where commenters on discussion forums are often those with strong opinions.[190] This strong

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186 'Lecture Topics,' Carine McCandless, accessed 15 August 2014, www.carinemccandless.com.
187 "I am determined to continue to be his voice and carry on his message." 'Home,' Carine McCandless, accessed 30 June 2013, www.carinemccandless.com.
188 'About Carine,' Carine McCandless, accessed 30 June 2013, www.carinemccandless.com.
189 Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), xi.
190 'Anyone ever consider going McCandless?' Survivalist Boards, accessed 30 June 2013, www.survivalistboards.com.

opposition has caused both admirers and detractors to not only hold, but defend, their views, which has helped to fortify his story in public consciousness.

Another factor that has periodically reinvigorated the story is the controversy surrounding the cause of death. Uncertainty over the precise cause of McCandless's lonely end has fuelled the debate over whether he is worthy of admiration, sympathy, or scorn. A 2013 article by Krakauer which appears in the *New Yorker*,[191] provides a reasonable summary of the various theories so far. In the book, published in 1996, Krakauer hypothesises that it was a toxin in the purportedly harmless wild-potato seeds that poisoned McCandless, essentially accelerating his starvation. This was in line with McCandless's self-diagnosis recorded in his journal: "EXTREMELY WEAK. FAULT OF POT. SEED,"[192] but it was an amendment of Krakauer's initial theory in the 1993 article in which he suggested that McCandless had mistaken toxic wild sweet pea seeds for apparently harmless wild-potato seeds due to their similar appearance.[193]

Interestingly, it is the latter, discarded, theory that Penn chose to adopt for his 2007 film. Both theories, however, imply that his death was more a tragic accident than reckless foolishness. Subsequent to the publication of *Into the Wild*, laboratory tests by Dr Thomas Clausen, an organic chemist at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, showed that there were no toxins in the seeds, and that McCandless could not have been affected by them. Krakauer then speculated that the wild-potato seeds may have been mouldy, and it was in fact this

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191 Krakauer, 'How Chris McCandless Died,' *The New Yorker*, 12 September 2013, accessed 13 September 2013, www.newyorker.com.
192 Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 188.
193 Krakauer, 'Death of an Innocent' in *Outside* (1993), 91. Accessed 15 August 2014, www.outsideonline.com.

mould which contained the toxins.[194] The most recent theory, put forward by Ronald Hamilton in a paper called "The Silent Fire," published online in 2012,[195] is that McCandless was indeed poisoned by a toxin in the wild-potato seeds, causing lathyrism. Hamilton's argument basically supports Krakauer's long-held position that the seeds played a role in McCandless's death – that it was not a simple case of starvation. Ron Lamothe, the filmmaker who created *Call of the Wild* (2007), a documentary about Chris McCandless, posits an alternative scenario at the end of his film: in addition to weight loss, simply as a result of a caloric deficit, McCandless may have been unable to escape the wild due to an arm or shoulder injury.[196]

There is worthy analysis to be done, and a great deal has been done, concerning Krakauer's presentation of the facts, the way Penn chose to stylise the film version of the story, or the controversy surrounding whether McCandless was a visionary hero of wanderlust, or a foolhardy narcissist who got himself killed and caused his family immeasurable grief. It could be interesting to explore other parallels or inconsistencies between the book, the film, and what 'actually' happened. However, though I refer to these ideas later, my primary focus is

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[194] Krakauer explains this in an interview on The Oprah Winfrey Show, 'Oscar Winner Sean Penn: His First Trip to "The Oprah Show,"' 20 September 2007. Accessed 15 August 2014, www.youtube.com. He also offers this theory in subsequent editions of the book.

[195] Hamilton, 'The Silent Fire – ODAP and the death of Christopher McCandless,' Christopher McCandless, accessed 30 September 2013, www.christophermccandless.info.

[196] Lamothe, 'The Call of the Wild: *Into the Wild* Debunked,' accessed 15 August 2014, www.tifilms.com.

This theory corresponds with the SOS note, which is quoted in Krakauer's book:
"ATTENTION POSSIBLE VISITORS.
S.O.S.
I NEED YOUR HELP. I AM INJURED, NEAR DEATH, AND TOO WEAK TO HIKE OUT OF HERE. I AM ALL ALONE, THIS IS *NO JOKE*. IN THE NAME OF GOD, PLEASE REMAIN TO SAVE ME. I AM OUT COLLECTING BERRIES CLOSE BY AND SHALL RETURN THIS EVENING. THANK YOU,
CHRIS MCCANDLESS
AUGUST ?" Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, (1996), 196-7.

not so much the real Christopher McCandless, but rather what he has come to represent in the public consciousness in terms of his masculinity, solitude, and relationship with nature. Even Lamothe, whose rigorous research unearthed several facts in conflict with the Krakauer-Penn version of events, admits at the end of his highly personal documentary: "The greater meaning of Chris's journey is what lives on. ... It is the idealised McCandless, the seeker, who matters most to me." And so his characterisation in *Into the Wild*, both the film and the book, will be taken prima facie without anxiety over distinctions between artistic licence and biographical fact. It is this McCandless, not the documentary or laboratory version,[197] that has become a cultural touchstone, a contemporary incarnation of a particular brand of masculinity, which is the core of what I wish to discuss.

Conveniently, in terms of contextualising him among historical figures of a similar persuasion, McCandless wore his influences on his sleeve. In fact, he chalked them on the insides of rail cars, talked about them for hours, and carved their names into pieces of wood. During the opening credits of the film, we see "Alexander Supertramp," McCandless's pseudonym during his travels, written on the inside edge of a freight train car. It is almost certainly a reference to *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* by WH Davies, who himself travelled all over the United States as a vagrant, begging for food and riding freight trains. Krakauer also records a reference to this vagabond-turned-published-author that inspired McCandless to change his name:

> "*Jack London is King*

[197] Sean Penn's *Into the Wild* has over 300,000 user votes on imdb.com, compared to the 200 users who took the time to vote on Lamothe's documentary. 'Into the Wild,' Internet Movie Database, accessed 18 August 2014, www.imdb.com. 'The Call of the Wild (2007), Internet Movie Database, accessed 18 August 2014, www.imdb.com.

> *Alexander Supertramp*
> *May 1992*
> GRAFFITO CARVED INTO A PIECE OF WOOD DISCOVERED AT THE SITE OF CHRIS MCCANDLESS'S DEATH."[198]

In the film, Carine McCandless, Chris's younger sister with whom he was "extremely close,"[199] is played by Jena Malone who does the principle voice-over – a dreamy, yet heavy-handed exposition, including a section where she explains his relationship with the authors he read obsessively:

> Chris measured himself and those around him by a fiercely rigorous moral code. He risked what could have been a relentlessly lonely path, but found company in the characters of the books he loved – from writers like Tolstoy, Jack London, and Thoreau. He could summon their words to suit any occasion, and he often would.

The scene takes place in his bedroom, an intimate space, suggesting something of McCandless's personality. We see a pile of books by the authors mentioned in the voice-over, emphasising their importance somewhat clumsily.[200] The fact that he compared himself and others to a "rigorous moral code" is indicative of his subscription to a normative ideology, which is described by Mosher and Tomkins in their paper on the application of script theory to hypermasculinity. They compare normative ideology with its converse, humanistic ideology:

> This polarity contrasts the humanist's faith in the intrinsic value of human experience and potential with the normative's faith in the ceaseless human struggle to live up to an ideal essence beyond man's power to set or measure. In normative ideology, humans inevitably fall short of this.... The ideology of *machismo* is a particular variant

198 Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 9.
199 Ibid., 20. In the film she claims, regarding Chris's relationship to his parents, "He said I was the only person in the world who could possibly understand what he had to say."
200 Another intertextual reference in this scene is a poster of Clint Eastwood's 'Man with No Name,' which links McCandless to an iconic outsider, who resists the oppressive conformity of society, and yet lives by his own unique moral code.

> of normative ideology … [it] sets the specific elevated standard of hypermasculinity – what it means to be a *real* man – for the macho man.[201]

Tomkins ties this normative ideology to script theory, as discussed in my introduction, and so it forms a part of an ideal narrative that must be acted out or performed by the individual. In response to critics of McCandless's survival skills, Penn briefly refers to this effort to prove masculine prowess:

> There are few people in Alaska who have done anything comparable to what Chris did. We're not talking about a week with another buddy and ATVs, hunting. This was 113 days, 79 of them by choice. And he did pretty damn well. Did he make mistakes? Sure. A lot of people do. But however many miles he needed to walk to become a man was up to him.[202]

Life, for McCandless, was a constant test of his ability to endure harsh conditions. He tested his moral fibre, athleticism, intelligence, his courage in the face of danger – essentially his masculinity – against his ideal macho script, written primarily by the authors he admired. The characters they created and the authors themselves, possibly romanticised by McCandless,[203] were, to him, paragons of masculinity by which he set the standards of his own life. Like Thoreau and Tolstoy, his lifestyle was ascetic.

> In college McCandless began emulating Tolstoy's asceticism and moral rigor to a degree that first astonished, and then alarmed, those who were close to him. When the boy headed off into the Alaska bush, he entertained no illusions that he was

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[201] Mosher and Tomkins, 'Scripting the Macho Man: Hypermasculine Socialization and Enculturation' (1988), 65 (authors' emphasis).
[202] Power, 'The Cult of Chris McCandless,' *Men's Journal*, September 2007, accessed 15 August 2014, www.mensjournal.com.
[203] For example, Krakauer explains Chris's life-long infatuation with Jack London, who "mirrored McCandless's passions," and then proceeds to eviscerate the character of the author, stating, "McCandless conveniently overlooked the fact that London himself had spent just a single winter in the North and that he'd died by his own hand on his California estate at the age of forty, a fatuous drunk, obese and pathetic, maintaining a sedentary existence that bore scant resemblance to the ideals he espoused in print." Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 45.

> trekking into a land of milk and honey; peril, adversity, and Tolstoyan renunciation were precisely what he was seeking.[204]

While at Emory University, he "lived off campus in a monkish room furnished with little more than a thin mattress on the floor, milk crates, and a table. He kept it as orderly and spotless as a military barracks."[205] He also chose not to have a telephone,[206] which may have been due to a neo-luddite austerity, but could just as likely have been another way to keep his family and friends at a distance, to protect his solitude. When he canoed down into Mexico, he did not see or speak to another person for thirty-six days, and for that time he lived on nothing but five pounds of rice and whatever marine life he could hunt or gather.[207] When he advises a new friend, an elderly man whom Krakauer refers to as Ron Franz, on how to travel and explore the American West, McCandless insists: "… you must do it economy style, no motels, do your own cooking, as a general rule spend as little as possible and you will enjoy it much more immensely."[208] Of course, as Susan Sontag reminds us, "there is no talented and rigorous asceticism that … doesn't produce a gain (rather than a loss) in the capacity for pleasure."[209] McCandless's own journals confirm this. For example, when he navigates an intricate canal system, a maze of dead-ends in Mexico, attempting to reach the Gulf of California in a canoe with the bare minimum of supplies and planning, we find extreme lows, such as: "Alex is dumbfounded," and, "Alex is crushed," followed by the euphoric declaration: "He is overjoyed and hope bursts back into his heart."[210] It was not a stoic denial of the senses, such as the desert monks, but a Thoreauvian asceticism, where the

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[204] Ibid., x.
[205] Ibid., 22.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid., 6.
[208] Ibid., 59.
[209] Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence' in *Styles of Radical Will* (1969), 8.
[210] Krakauer, *Into The Wild* (2007), 34.

senses are kept "free and pure" for the sake of more profound sensual experiences. McCandless's life seems to echo what Thoreau writes in a journal entry: "See, hear, smell, taste, etc., while these senses are fresh and pure."[211] This is particularly true for the way he is depicted in the film, where he is often in some state of blissful awe at the majesty and sensation of nature – we see him running with horses, leaping from cliff tops into rivers, weeping at the sight of a deer and her fawn, biting hungrily into game he has hunted and prepared, or just staring up at the sky as the camera circles slowly around him.

As the arena for his solitude and a foil for the expression of his masculinity, the natural environment plays a crucial role in our understanding of Christopher McCandless, the man on the margin. His odyssey was not only a flight from society, but a pursuit of "nature" as the wilderness experience. Though seldom as earnest and extreme as it was for McCandless, the desire to "get back to nature" was, and is, by no means uncommon. An aspect of the boomer generation legacy – one that Generation X was the first to experience – was the "green" movement going mainstream. Though occasionally met with some derision, such as from Lori Zarza, his supervisor at McDonald's,[212] McCandless's love for nature was not incomprehensible to mainstream American culture. Many people would not only understand but admire his passion, as shown by the large number of people who have been inspired by his life. It is something Krakauer refers to as: "the grip wilderness has on the American imagination."[213]

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211 Harding, *A Thoreau Handbook* (1959), 133. [quoting from Thoreau, *Journals II*, 330.]
212 Krakauer, *Into The Wild* (2007), 41.
213 Ibid., x.

William Cronon, however, suggests that the reverse is closer to the truth. It is not so much the grip wilderness has on the imagination, but the grip the American imagination has on wilderness, or the idea of "wilderness." He states that what we call wilderness "is not a pristine sanctuary … without the contaminating taint of civilisation. Instead, it is a product of that civilisation."[214] The wilderness ideal is not something essential to the human condition that has always existed in some archetypal form. It is a cultural product. Cronon points out that 250 years ago in the history of America and Europe, there were not "nearly so many people wandering around remote corners of the planet looking for what today we call 'the wilderness experience'."[215] It was only through the vocabulary developed by writers such as John Muir and Thoreau that the wilderness began to take on the language-shaped form it has today – a view of the natural environment inextricably linked to the way these writers described it. The paragraph below is an extract from Thoreau's description of his 1846 climb of Mount Katahdin, which he expresses in the third person:

> He is more lone than you can imagine…. Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at a disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, why came ye here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you.

Cronon discusses this passage in an essay entitled 'The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature', explaining that "[Thoreau's] words took the physical mountain on which he stood and transmuted it into an icon of the sublime: a symbol of God's presence on earth."[216] There is a transformation that takes place in the mind – the cold, impartial material world must pass through the faculties of the subjective individual, and

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[214] Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness' in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (1995), 69.
[215] Ibid., 70.
[216] Ibid., 75.

cannot emerge unchanged. Nature is exalted, vilified, or underestimated, but never entirely itself – unaltered by its encounter with consciousness. In a personal remark concerning his own adventures in mountaineering, Krakauer implies that a Thoreauvian glorification of nature may, in part, be caused by solitude itself. He writes: "Because I was alone, however, even the mundane seemed charged with meaning. The ice looked colder and more mysterious, the sky a cleaner shade of blue."[217] The man isolated in the natural environment may be more inclined to exaggerate his impression of nature – both the terror and the beauty – *because* he is alone, unmoored from the moderating effect of third party perspective. In the absence of human companionship, the encounter with nature is not merely undiluted, but transformed by a hyperbolic effect. It is the sublime experience.

The sublime experience had a powerful effect on Christopher McCandless – even through the second-hand experience of reading.[218] Krakauer mentions, for example, the effect Jack London's writing had on the young man:

> McCandless had been infatuated with London since childhood. London's fervent condemnation of capitalist society, his glorification of the primordial world, his championing of the great unwashed – all of it mirrored McCandless's passions. Mesmerized by London's turgid portrayal of life in Alaska … he seemed to forget 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.[219]

Krakauer summarises the problem with this rift between the imagination and the reality of nature through reflection on his own near-death experience climbing the Devils Thumb,

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[217] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 138.
[218] Regarding the influence of the reading experience on McCandless, Krakauer writes that "it would be easy to stereotype Christopher McCandless as another boy who felt too much, a loopy young man who read too many books…" Ibid., 183.
[219] Ibid., 45.

which he shares in the hope that it would "throw some oblique light on the enigma of Chris McCandless."[220] He confesses that he "acted according to an obscure gap-ridden logic," and that "[i]n the end, of course, it changed almost nothing. But I came to appreciate that mountains make poor receptacles for dreams."[221] Cronon draws a similar comparison between what we see and what we want to see in nature:

> Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural. As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires.[222]

The projected and the reflected depend more on the subjective perspective than nature itself. We burden nature with the perceived fulfilment of our own emptiness. McCandless, too, is shown to be a dreamer of nature, and so it is not surprising that film is such an effective medium for representing his perspective of nature. Because whatever nature on film *is*, it is certainly not nature. It is nature magnified, intensified – nature when the light is perfect, nature in slow motion, accompanied by a musical score, and edited into a rhythm of composed images. If it is true, as Scott Slovic asserts, that the Alaskan wilderness is "the place many Americans take to be the ultimate home of more-than-human reality,"[223] then surely cinema is that medium best suited to creating a "reality" that transcends the merely human.

In contrast to some of the urban scenes where McCandless's movements are sped up, or punctuated by freeze-frames, the shots of him in nature are often filmed in slow motion.

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[220] Ibid., x.
[221] Ibid., 154.
[222] Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness' (1995), 69-70.
[223] Slovic, 'The spirit of these rocks and water' (2009), 375.

The film scholar, Louis Giannetti, points out that "slow motion tends to ritualize and solemnize movement,"[224] which helps to create the sublime effect of McCandless not just in nature, but in awe of nature – almost in a state of worship. Penn romanticises the 'pure' engagement between the human character and his 'natural' environment. The simple acts of walking, looking, washing, and hunting are all elevated by slow motion and music to the state of rituals performed to usher McCandless, and the audience, into a transcendent experience of nature, an epiphany, even an encounter with the sacred.

The arresting power of the image, as opposed to language, is an idea Susan Sontag refers to in her essay 'The Aesthetics of Silence' and explains the following point of view:

> [T]here *are* priorities: rich as opposed to vacuous objects, events with a certain allure. (This is the incentive for trying to peel back language, allowing the "things" themselves to speak.) [And] if there are states of false (language-clogged) consciousness, there are also authentic states of consciousness – which it's the function of art to promote.[225]

The experience of being alone in the wild is, fundamentally, an experience – before it is a story – even if it is an experience inextricably bound to all the stories that preceded it. Perhaps in reimagining the McCandless story for film, there is an attempt to strip away the mass of words, to "peel back" language and allow nature, or at least an image of nature, to speak for itself. But, of course, cinema comes with layers of its own language. It is impossible to dig deep enough to engage that "authentic [state] of consciousness," to shovel away the layers until some granite of reality is struck.

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[224] Giannetti, *Understanding Movies* (2002), 128.
[225] Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence' (1969), 25 (author's emphasis).

The film does not unpack a false consciousness in order to reveal something authentic. Despite the filmmakers' apparently earnest attempts at factual veracity, there is also a sense in which the film is more faithful to a romantic ideal of McCandless; it perpetuates the McCandless mythology – for better or worse – passing it on to the next generation of wanderers and solitaries. But perhaps it is not so simple. Is this sublime experience merely a solitary man projecting his dreams of the natural environment onto the 'screen'? Through his transcendental encounters with nature, as represented in film and literature, McCandless grows into a legend, a symbol pointing to meaning more lasting than himself. It is not nature, but he who is transformed. From the opening credits as we see McCandless trudging 'into the wild' through a snow-covered landscape, Vedder's expository lyrics in "Long Nights" inform us that he has been changed: "Who I was before, I cannot recall." And when he finally attempts to leave the wild, the lyrics of "No Ceiling" assure us: "I'll keep this wisdom in my flesh," because it is not merely an emotional and psychological transformation that occurs, but a radical corporeal metamorphosis – most obviously the growth of his beard and the extreme weight loss. However, while we might project our own longings and desires, and effectively see ourselves in nature, it is not nature that is projected back onto us. Man may see himself in nature, but nature does not see itself in man. Jeffers might hope that some men, in death, achieve the same "temper" as mountains, and Thoreau writes of "[m]en nearer of kin to the rocks and wild animals than we."[226] McCandless, too, is strongly associated with nature in the film: his passion for Alaska, his many moments of exaltation in nature – either rushing through it or gently relishing it, and details such as the way he reflects the head movement of a deer in the forest[227] looking up. McCandless seems to mimic the

[226] Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (1909), 92.
[227] The subtitle in the film reads: Pacific Crest Trail, Northern California, August 1990.

deer and their movements are cut together to show them both looking up at an aeroplane flying overhead.

But however close the association, it is extremely clear that McCandless is *not* one with nature. They are not made of the same material. In the film, at the conclusion of the 'MANHOOD' section, we see the aftermath of his successful moose hunt turned tragedy. We see McCandless tearfully writing in his journal about his regret – that killing the moose was "one of the greatest tragedies of [his] life." We then cut to a scene on the riverbank where four wolves and a bald eagle feed on the moose carcass. They graphically tear the flesh and noisily devour the muscle and sinew. The voice-over is McCandless reading Thoreau:

> There was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place of heathenism and superstitious rites, to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to the wild animals than we.[228]

The viewer is confronted by a stark contrast between McCandless and the wild. While McCandless is devastated by the unnecessary death of the moose – overwhelmed by regret and tortured by guilt – the wild animals simply accept the opportunity to feed on the remains. They have no concern for where it came from, or whether it had been a mother, whereas McCandless is seen to spare a caribou when he sees she has a calf. He may love the wild; he may be in the wild; but he is clearly not of the wild. His human capacity for guilt sets him apart from the animals. He does not have the requisite coldness of heart to be entirely united with nature. We are left with some insight into his alienation – not only from society, but from nature as well. He is alone in the crowd and alone in the wild. The final image of

[228] Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (1909), 92.

the sequence is an aerial long shot of McCandless floating naked down the river in a Christ pose. This ambiguous allusion seems to imply his immersion in nature, his vulnerability, and the sense that he is voluntarily at the mercy of its cold current. It also works to foreshadow his death, which he does not seem to resist, and the impression of one who is not "of this world": misunderstood, rejected, and ultimately alone – even among crowds of thousands.

The masculine solitude of McCandless in many ways runs parallel to that of Thoreau. Besides asceticism for the sake of increased sensation, they both show an extreme commitment to truth. In a scene from the film, McCandless paraphrases a quotation from Walden: "Rather than love, than money, than faith, than fame, than fairness… give me truth."[229] Atkinson asserts that Thoreau refused compromise and chose freedom "though everyone else sold his soul to comfort and convenience."[230] This statement could also quite easily describe McCandless, whose devotion to truth led to a judgemental attitude towards society. Though personable with individuals, as shown by the many relational connections he made on his journey, his views on society in general were severely critical. Krakauer describes him as "an adherent of Thoreau and Tolstoy, an ideologue who expressed nothing but contempt for the bourgeois trappings of mainstream America."[231]

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[229] "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth." Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 294.
[230] Atkinson, introduction to *Walden* by HD Thoreau (1937), xvi.
[231] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 40.
In another passage, "McCandless explained to Burres that he'd grown tired of Bullhead, tired of punching a clock, tired of the 'plastic people' he worked with." Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 44. The phrase "plastic people" is reminiscent of a scene in *The Graduate* (1967) where Ben, Dustin Hoffman's character who experiences a severe sense of post-college disillusionment, receives Mr McGuire's "one word" of advice: plastics. But it also resembles Thoreau's idea of superficial connections in society where "[s]urface meets surface." Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 721.

His ability to stoically endure hardship, pain, and hunger, is another key point in McCandless's masculinity. This endurance translated into a strength which made him a fine physical labourer. In an interview with Krakauer, McCandless's alpha male type[232] friend and occasional boss, Wayne Westerberg, comments: "He was the hardest worker I've ever seen. Didn't matter what it was, he'd do it: hard physical labor, mucking rotten grain and dead rats out of the bottom of the hole … if he started a job, he'd finish it. It was almost like a moral thing for him."[233] McCandless's work ethic based on principle mirrors Thoreau's pride in, and respect for, manual labour.

Thoreau may have been a genius, but McCandless was also of above-average intelligence, graduating with honours and a 3.72 grade-point average.[234] Hegemonic American masculinity, however, does not always approve of academic achievement. Westerberg is suspicious of Chris's intelligence, saying, "He read a lot. Used a lot of big words. I think maybe part of what got him into trouble was that he did too much thinking."[235] He remarks that McCandless "wasn't the kind of guy who would go out and pick up girls just to get laid."[236] From the perspective of hegemonic masculinity, in which sexual conquest of women is a key gauge of success as a man, this may be a charitable way of saying that McCandless was not sexually active. Again, Krakauer's description of Chris's sexuality is similar to what we know about Thoreau. Krakauer writes:

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232 Westerberg is described by Krakauer as "a hyperkinetic man with thick shoulders and a black goatee." Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 16. In the film he is played by Vince Vaughn as macho, but kind, respected, and garrulous to the point of dominating conversation.
233 Ibid.,18.
234 Ibid., 20.
235 Ibid., 18.
236 Ibid., 66.

> [T]here is little evidence that he was sexually active as a teenager and even less to suggest that he slept with any woman after graduating from high school. … It seems that McCandless was drawn to women but remained largely or entirely celibate, as chaste as a monk. … And in the chapter on "Higher Laws" in Thoreau's *Walden*, a copy of which was also discovered in the bus, McCandless circled "Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it."[237]

Comparing him to Thoreau, whom he refers to as "a life-long virgin," and John Muir, Krakauer suggests that McCandless, like other men "seduced by the wild," was "driven by a variety of lust that supplanted sexual desire."[238] The absence of sex amounts to a significant deficit in the hegemonic masculine capital of the solitary male. It is a deficit that perhaps inspires him to venture into extremes of the other tenets of the hypermasculine script.

One example is the incessant appeal of adventure. In a letter to Ronald Franz, McCandless writes: "The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure."[239] And it can be said that at the centre of any masculine adventure is the element of risk, of danger, the real or imagined possibility of death. McCandless is portrayed as a man profoundly attracted to places and activities that could result in his death. In the film, he goes rock climbing with minimal gear, runs whitewater rapids in a kayak with no helmet, and enters the Alaskan wilderness without a map and what many would consider the essential supplies for survival. Perhaps similar to the way his asceticism was rewarded with sensual pleasure in nature, the high risk of death or serious injury only made the success of his exploits more rapturous. It is, however, a seemingly natural tendency in young men. It is at least very common within hegemonic American masculinity, as Krakauer explains:

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[237] Ibid., 66-7.
[238] Ibid., 67.
[239] Ibid., 58.

> It is hardly unusual for a young man to be drawn to a pursuit considered reckless by his elders; engaging in risky behavior is a rite of passage in our culture no less than in most others. Danger has always held a certain allure.[240]

Though it may be common among many cultures that young men desire to break free and take risks, this desire is expressed in different ways depending on the culture they are rebelling against. Kimmel goes on to mention the incidence of teenagers driving too fast, drinking too much, doing drugs, and the ease with which nations are able to recruit young men for war. Survival, especially when it is against the odds, is possibly the most basic way in which a man may assert his masculinity – by triumphing over death itself. It also tests his athleticism, an arena in which McCandless was gifted. "By the time he was in his teens, he was one of the top distance runners in the region."[241] And for a man testing himself against the wild, survival – like adventure – is kinetic, inextricably bound to forward motion; stasis means death, or worse: boredom. Thoreau romanticises primitive man's experience of nature, admiring the journey and adventure inherent in his relationship with the environment:

> The very simplicity and nakedness of man's life in the primitive ages imply this advantage, at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature. When he was refreshed with food and sleep, he contemplated his journey again. He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world, and was either threading the valleys, or crossing the plains, or climbing the mountain-tops.[242]

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[240] Ibid., 181.
[241] Ibid., 111.
[242] Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 33.

Also linked to danger and adventure is McCandless's masculine affinity for deadly weapons. When he enrolled in college "he insisted on taking [a] big knife and gun with him"[243] He had an emotional connection to his guns. Perhaps they offered a sense of security. When he has his .38-caliber handgun confiscated after spending a night in jail for trying to slip into the country without an ID, McCandless describes it in his journal (writing of himself in the third person) as a "beautiful Colt Python, to which he was much attached."[244] Although he was happy to burn his money, abandon his car, and disown his family, McCandless "buried his Winchester deer-hunting rifle" along with his books so that he might retrieve them at a later point.[245] He allows himself to be attached to books and guns, because he knows he can leave them underground, while he travels. Unlike people, material objects have no relational expectation; they make no demands on his freedom.[246]

Solitary journey and danger are key to McCandless's idea of adventure. And a lack of attachment, afforded to an extent by his youth, is vital to both. A family man with a mortgage, commitments and possessions would have more to lose and less liberty to leave. As he 'writes', or rather 'carves' dramatically into a slab of wood with a hunting knife: "Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom." For McCandless, where there is security, there is no adventure. The man who fears death and clings to life is already dead.

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[243] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 119. Krakauer describes Walt McCandless as amused by the memory of his son first enrolling in college after he spent the summer driving around the country in search of adventure: "Chris walks in with a scraggly beard and worn-out clothes, looking like Jeremiah Johnson, packing a machete and a deer-hunting rifle." Ibid., 119.
[244] Ibid., 37.
[245] Ibid., 29.
[246] I will discuss the outsider's relationship with objects more fully in the chapter on *Taxi Driver*.

His masculine affinity for danger may be attributed to his youth, but youth in itself is an aspect of the dominant image of hegemonic American masculinity. In Erving Goffman's fourteen attributes describing the "only … complete unblushing male in America," he lists "young" as the first descriptor.[247] There are, however, other standards that McCandless does not meet. Considering the rest of the list, which includes: "married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports."[248] Although he can tick most of the boxes, McCandless fails the "blush" test in that he was unmarried, had no children, was largely unemployed, and was rather short.[249]

But it is not only hegemonic masculinity that admires youth and the attendant strength and danger lust. The romantic masculinity of the wilderness enthusiast is also strongly associated with youth and solitude. Ethel Seybold points out that this "insistence upon solitude was so characteristic of youthful transcendentalists that Emerson expressed a mild regret that so many promising young people should feel the necessity of withdrawal and retreat."[250] In the early pages of *Walden*, Thoreau clearly states the value of youth:

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[247] Kimmel, *Guyland* (2008), 54.
[248] Ibid.
[249] Krakauer observes that "some people have made much of the fact that … he was small in stature and may have suffered from a 'short man's complex', a fundamental insecurity that drove him to prove his manhood by means of extreme physical challenges. Others have posited that an unresolved Oedipal conflict was at the root of his fatal odyssey. Although there may be some truth in both hypotheses, this sort of posthumous off-the-rack psychoanalysis is a dubious, highly speculative enterprise that inevitably demeans and trivializes the absent analysand." Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 183.
[250] Seybold, *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics* (1951), 8.

> What old people say you cannot do, you try and find that you can. Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new. … Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost.[251]

What the old has lost, in this view, is innocence. What the young retains is the liberty of man unsullied by experience. For with experience comes disappointment, and with that a sharp desire for security and a rigid distrust of new ideas. And though Thoreau was writing this in his relative youth at Walden Pond, he echoed these ideas in his later life, longing for a time when natural sounds found "answering depths"[252] in him. Thoreau was never old, since he only lived to be 44, but as he aged the beauty of nature made less of an impression on him, which, as discussed in that chapter, he counted as a moral failing. Sherman Paul notes that "when he reviewed his daily work in the *Journal,* there was fact, not insight, to tell him that for all his ardor he had not known nature with the 'Indian wisdom' of his youth." For Thoreau it was the influence of society, a sense of the world being "too much with us" that caused the loss of innocence: "our whole soul is stained by what it works in, like the dyer's hand."[253]

And so the young man attempts to make his mark on the world before it can leave its mark on him, and the only man who succeeds is the one who dies young. Unfortunately young men do not always have the clearest ideas on how best to leave their mark, and so they write their names instead. McCandless left a lot of graffiti on his travels. He uses his assumed name, Alexander Supertramp. In the film, he chooses the new moniker while shaving in a public bathroom, and writes it on the mirror with a discarded stick of lipstick he finds. We

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[251] Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 8.
[252] Paul, *The Shores of America* (1972), 268.
[253] Ibid.

see his name written several times throughout the film, often with the date. Krakauer sees the name as a symbol of "complete severance from his previous life," making him "master of his own destiny."[254] There's a sense of claim-staking, of appropriation similar to what Thoreau describes when the poet "[enjoys] the most valuable part of a farm."[255] In the early 1930s, one Everett Ruess embarked on a journey similar to McCandless's – both in its ascetic adventure and eventual tragedy. Krakauer describes the mysterious compulsion young men have to inscribe their names on things with reference to twenty-year-old Ruess's graffito amongst the nine-hundred-year-old rock art of the Anasazi people:[256]

> Everett Ruess carved his nom de plume into the canyon wall below a panel of Anasazi pictographs … "NEMO 1934," he scrawled, no doubt moved by the same impulse that compelled Chris McCandless to inscribe "Alexander Supertramp/May 1992" on the wall of the Sushana bus – an impulse not so different, perhaps, from that which inspired the Anasazi to embellish the rock with their own now-indecipherable symbols.[257]

Despite many "uncanny parallels"[258] between the two young men, an interesting difference is that Ruess wrote many eloquent thoughtful letters to friends and family, whereas McCandless wrote only a few cheery postcards and kept a very lean diary in Alaska – mostly concerning weather, his physical condition, and which animals he variously saw, killed, and ate. Of course the deficiency is even more acute when we compare McCandless's writing to that of the authors he adored, expressing his praise in trite phrases such as his recommendation that Westerberg should read *War and Peace* because it "is a very powerful

254 Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 22-3.
255 Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 74.
256 Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 88.
257 Ibid., 89.
258 Ibid., 91.

and highly symbolic book."[259] His longer journal entries betray a propensity for melodrama as he describes his emotional extremes, referring to himself always in the third person with what Krakauer calls "a stilted self-consciousness."[260] In a single day's entry, as a characteristic example, he begins with "[a]ll hopes collapse!" descends to "[c]ompletely demoralized and frustrated he lays in his canoe at day's end and weeps," and then ends with a rescue and the proclamation, "It is a miracle."[261]

Though he casually expressed his intention to write a book on his travels, his journal entries in Alaska do not indicate whether he would have been able to follow through. The entries are perfunctory, often with days and weeks in between. What follows is his complete Alaskan journal:

> Day 2: Fall through the ice day. Day 4: Magic bus day. Day 9: Weakness. Day 10: Snowed in. Day 13: Porcupine day.... Day 14: Misery. Day 31: Move bus. Grey bird. Ash bird. Squirrel. Gourmet duck! Day 43: MOOSE! Day 48: Maggots already. Smoking appears ineffective. Don't know, looks like disaster. I now wish I had never shot the moose. One of the greatest tragedies of my life. Day 68: Beaver Dam. Disaster. Day 69: Rained in, river looks impossible. Lonely, Scared. Day 74: Terminal man. Faster. Day 78: Missed wolf. Ate potato seeds and many berries coming. Day 94: Woodpecker. Fog. Extremely weak. Fault of potato seed. Much trouble just to stand up. Starving. Great jeopardy. Day 100: Death looms as serious threat, too weak to walk out, have literally become trapped in wild – no game. Day 101-103: [No written entries, just the days listed.] Day 104: Missed bear! Day 105: Five squirrel. Caribou. Day 107: Beautiful [blue]berries. Day 108-113: [Days were marked only with slashes.]"[262]

He did, however, serve as columnist, and even editor, of his student newspaper, *The Emory Wheel*, but "[t]he opinions he expressed in print, argued with idiosyncratic logic, were all over

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[259] Ibid., 33.
[260] Ibid., 29.
[261] Ibid., 35.
[262] 'Christopher McCandless Bio,' Christopher McCandless, accessed 15 August 2014, www.christophermccandless.info.

the map."[263] He shared Thoreau's intention of writing to influence society, but he was not nearly so articulate and persuasive. But, in 2011, almost two decades after his death, his writings and photographs were published as *Back to the Wild*, finally allowing McCandless to "tell his own story."[264] Whether McCandless – given enough time – could have written a non-fiction adventure book equal to Krakauer's is debatable. His skills as a mature writer were never tested, but what is clear is that he was a devoted reader, an "adherent."[265] In 'Self-Reliance', Emerson warns against reading that "is mendicant and sycophantic,"[266] and perhaps McCandless is guilty of the latter to the extent that his admiration for Tolstoy, London, and Thoreau bordered on fanaticism, but he certainly did not passively accept all that he read. This zeal is even mentioned in Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*:

> Thoreau has had a history of changing peoples' lives, at least by their own say-so, or of confirming changes on which they had resolved. His admirers have occasionally been known to follow his example even to the point of death."[267]

His whole life was a test of the theories he admired. And his death was the proof. As Thoreau suggests in his chapter on 'Reading', when applied to the right subject matter, it can be the mark of an adventurous student,[268] and may even "[require] a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object."[269] Thoreau's concept of a "good book" is associated with danger, rebellion, and daring:

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263 Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 123.
264 'Home,' Back to the Wild, accessed 15 August 2014, www.backtothewildbook.org.
265 Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 40.
266 Emerson, 'Self-Reliance' (1984), 268.
267 Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), 312. Since Buell's work was published prior to *Into the Wild*, McCandless was still relatively anonymous and his name is relegated to a footnote to the reference I have quoted.
268 Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 91. "… the adventurous student will always study the classics…"
269 Ibid., 91-2.

> Books, not which afford us a cowering enjoyment, but in which each thought is of unusual daring; such as an idle man cannot read, and a timid one would not be entertained by, which even make us dangerous to existing institutions,– such call I good books.[270]

Reading, in this sense, is a serious, almost noble, act requiring total dedication. In both the book and the film it is made extremely clear that Chris's reading material influenced his actions, and there is no shortage of either action, or dramatic passages to inspire or explain it. The words of famous writers provide the context for the McCandless adventure. We see his life through the lens of pithy quotations. It is the way Krakauer chooses to frame the story, and it is so effective that Sean Penn seeks to perpetuate the technique, using a good deal of text on screen and voice-over narration. His life dissolves into the framing device. It is difficult to think of McCandless apart from his literary influences, to imagine him without the portions of the books he chose to star and underline, or scribble "nature/purity" in the margin. Who would he be without, as Slovic writes, "[t]he sensibilities of all these environmental visionaries and raconteurs … [reverberating] in [his] private exultations"?[271]

In terms of the narrative effect, the voices of these writers provide a larger cast of characters, populating scenes in much the same way that Thoreau's "former inhabitants" and other imagined company enrich the quality of his solitude. As mentioned, Chris's sister Carine understands his reading as a way of finding company in the characters and authors – an echo of Thoreau's idea that "books are the society we keep."[272] But it is not only as containers of imagined personae that McCandless finds companionship in books, he also takes comfort in

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[270] Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1937), 349.
[271] Slovic, 'The spirit of these rocks and water' (2009), 375.
[272] Ibid.

their facticity, their provision of knowledge. For as Nicolas Berdyaev explains in *Solitude and Society*, knowledge itself seems to offer a salve to loneliness:

> Man's longing for knowledge is an expression of his endeavour to overcome solitude. The pursuit of knowledge involves a longing for the Other Self, for others, an unusual expansion of the Ego and of the consciousness…[273]

And so it is not only London and Tolstoy's figments of fiction that alleviate McCandless's solitude, but even the pure information in books on edible plants, which he studied meticulously – although possibly not meticulously enough. Of course, his passionate study of the local flora was in part due to his life literally depending on it, but also because it offered a conduit of knowledge connecting him at once to all the centuries of people who had sought survival in the wilderness, and indeed to the wilderness itself, for as he deepened his knowledge of nature, he deepened his intimacy with it, enriching his experience.

To McCandless, experience was everything. It was an end itself, and did not need to be conveyed back to society in artistic form. He certainly experienced enough of a creative impulse to keep some record of his journey in scant words and a few photographs. He was a great story-teller, and could hold the attention of friends for hours as he recounted his adventures. Westerberg even tells of his talent as a musician, as McCandless took to a piano and entertained a small crowd at his farewell party.[274] But truly it was through his life, and not any kind of creative output, that he influenced people. He was not the poet, but the poem, or as Thoreau puts it:

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[273] Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society* (1938), 96.
[274] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 69.

> It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look …. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour.[275]

The sustained public interest in his life is evidence of the fact that McCandless, regardless of his intentions or failings, fashioned a life worthy of contemplation. It is tragic, however, that this sort of life, an extreme life, cannot be maintained in the absence of a meaningful artistic outlet. Krakauer includes a quotation from Theodore Roszak to illuminate this particular problem:

> It may, after all, be the bad habit of creative talents to invest themselves in pathological extremes that yield remarkable insights but no durable way of life for those who cannot translate their psychic wounds into significant art or thought.[276]

A rebel might be called reckless; a wanderer, irresponsible; and a poet, a fool. But the poem itself is innocent. The overwhelming public sympathy for McCandless, despite his obvious failings and rash behaviour, suggests that the response of at least some vocal segment of society has been one of grace accorded to the ignorant – an empathy imparted to one who should have known better, but didn't.

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[275] Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 81.
[276] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 71. [quoting from Theodore Roszak's 'In Search of the Miraculous']

An Education in Solitude

"Got a mind full of questions and a teacher in my soul." — Eddie Vedder

If the brief life of Christopher McCandless echoes the thoughts of great American individualists and nature writers, his masculine script is perhaps nowhere so accurately and succinctly defined as in Emerson's pithy dare: "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist."[277] Although Emerson almost certainly means "man" in the universal sense – the call to nonconformity as a call to humanity – there is also a sense of a personal challenge. As Mosher and Tomkins explain, the ideology of machismo is a normative script, an elevated standard of masculinity, which the individual seeks to conform to, and the dare to be a nonconformist is precisely the kind of normative value that McCandless might use to test himself against. Also implicit in Emerson's challenge is that in order to be an individual, a discernible person in any way distinct from society at large, it is essential that one resists the assimilation that unavoidably follows a life of compliance to social convention. Frances Ferguson explains this as a definitive feature of solitude:

> In the empirical account, solitude comes to seem the inevitable psychological reflexiveness that creates individuation as a terror of being included in a social induction. In the formal account, solitude represents the difficulties of arriving at any account of anyone whatever outside a process of systematic formalization.[278]

Much like Thoreau, McCandless's solitude is motivated not only by a deep affinity for nature, but a rejection of society and the ideologies it represents. He is compelled by the conviction that if he is to preserve his soul, he must define himself "outside a process of

[277] Emerson, 'Self-Reliance' (1984), 261.
[278] Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (1992), 32.

systematic formalization." And this conviction is presented as something internal and irresistible – like the voice Thoreau describes in the early pages of *Walden*:

> The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well? You may say the wisest thing you can old man, – you who have lived seventy years, not without honor of a kind, – I hear an irresistible voice which invites me away from all that. One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels.[279]

It is interesting how Thoreau defines and distinguishes between the tendency to conform and the instinct to rebel. "Good behaviour," or behaviour which society deems to be appropriate, is guided by some demon – a force that enters from outside and possesses, controls – whereas the voice that calls away from that oppression, those empty shells of behaviour modification, leads to freedom. It is not clear whether the voice, for Thoreau, is external or internal – perhaps it is both. For McCandless, the voice to abandon society and renounce its predominant values, regardless of its origin, resonated with him profoundly. Krakauer describes him as "an ideologue who expressed nothing but contempt for the bourgeois trappings of mainstream America."[280] He sought a "Tolstoyan renunciation"[281] of all the comforts that conformity afforded. But this is by no means unique: an inclination to rebel has been associated with the American identity for centuries.[282] This identity, defined to a large degree by resistance, survival, and self-sufficiency is illuminated by Richard Slotkin's interpretation of that early champion of the American frontier, the mythology of Daniel Boone:

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[279] Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 10.
[280] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 40.
[281] Ibid., x.
[282] cf. Emerson's gendering of conformity as feminine, whereas he styles rejection of societal values and pursuit of independence as distinctly masculine in 'Self-Reliance'.

> The spiritual impact of Boone's experience … is to make him the perfect stoic – patient as an Indian, indifferent to danger, fearless, and content to live as the wilderness demands, by hunting and hiding in solitude.[283]

This hero of America is at once fearless of the wilderness, and in submission to its demands. That is the rational, independent response of the Boone character to the beauty and horror of wild nature. Though it is a generalised account, it may be useful to trace this rebellious American kick against constraint. It is a nation founded on a war for independence; freedom is something for which men fight. Oppression and control – no matter how broadly tolerated, or insidiously styled to be appealing – must be resisted. What determines the measure of a man is the lengths he will go to in that fight: the sacrifices he will make, the suffering he will endure, or the remote destinations he will flee to in the pursuit of freedom. This lonely, unrelenting, often self-destructive, hunt for meaning – carried out through a lifestyle of rebellion – is described by Camus as the nature of the Absurd:

> The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth which is defiance.[284]

This sense of rebellion in search of freedom and truth has perhaps been re-energised in post-WWII generations, where it was particularly prominent in the counterculture of the Baby Boomers in the 1960s and early '70s. But, as Thoreau points out, it is not easy to pass ideological batons from one generation to the next. Many of the activist endeavours of the Boomers did effect change, which became a new, revised status quo as former protesters shaved, took jobs, got married, and had children. McCandless, born in 1968, was a member

[283] Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (1996), 284.
[284] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1981), 55.

of Generation X – a generation stereotyped by Hollywood movies[285] in the late 1980s and throughout the '90s as disaffected slackers – latchkey kids who grew up watching MTV while their parents got divorced. They witnessed the failure of protest culture to resist the mainstream indefinitely – although the Boomers had a significant impact on conventional American values, they were eventually assimilated into the capitalist machine with its emphasis on financial prosperity and consumerism which characterised the economic success of the 1980s and '90s, neatly defined by Gordon Gecko's memorable line in *Wall Street* (1987), "Greed … is good."[286] To Gen X, this materialism seemed like hypocrisy. The people who refused to "trust anyone over 30,"[287] were now in their forties and fifties and had, in the eyes of the current youth, 'sold out' – despite their ideals of free love and fighting the capitalist system, they eventually succumbed to the ultimate societal conventions of getting married and securing employment. When the following generation saw their parents working jobs they did not like, married to people they did not love, they wanted no part in it. They left those vessels stranded. Activism was clearly not sustainable, and so they turned to in-activism. If the Boomers were part of a "movement"[288] then Gen X was a defiance of movement. They refused to be 'upwardly mobile' or to climb corporate ladders. Disillusioned with the values of the past, they were slow to stand *for* anything until they

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285 *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989), *Pump Up the Volume* (1990), *Slacker* (1991), *Singles* (1992), *Wayne's World* (1992), *Dazed and Confused* (1993), *Reality Bites* (1994), *Clerks* (1994), etc.

286 The full line is: "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good." However, it is generally quoted in the abbreviated form.

287 "We have a saying in the movement that we don't trust anybody over 30." Jack Weinberg, 24-year-old leader of the Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley, during an interview with a *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter, c. 1965. 'Jack Weinberg,' Bartleby, accessed 15 August 2014, www.bartleby.com.

288 "In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, it was as though [a permeable] membrane separated the mainstream culture, then called "the Establishment," from the counterculture, often referred to as "the Movement." Monhollon, R. L. ed., *Baby Boom: People and Perspectives* (2010), 117.
The book includes an essay by Scott MacFarlane on the subject, which is simply called 'The Counterculture'. Ibid., 117-132.

could be sure it was worth standing for. Instead they stood against things – they were critical, or at least suspicious, of corporate greed, consumerism, the institution of marriage, government authority and established power structures. And this attitude was expressed through non-participation, and ostensible apathy, towards employment, marriage, and political activity.

The 'grunge' culture of the early nineties, perhaps the most identifiable anti-movement of Generation X, prized authenticity and resisted mainstream conformity. For example their anti-consumerism found an outlet in fashion marked by the used, damaged, and over-sized clothing worn by some of the bands in the alternative rock scene in Seattle.[289] It was the appearance of not caring about appearances. Jeans were torn and tattered. Sweater sleeves were stretched over the hand with a hole in the cuff for the thumb – a trend made popular by Kurt Cobain, frontman of the definitive grunge rock band, Nirvana. Grunge bands such as Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, and Alice in Chains captured Gen X disillusionment, frustration, and anger. It channelled the punk music of the '70s and early '80s, and was nowhere better exemplified than in the songs of Kurt Cobain, characterised by an alternation between disaffected lyrics mumbled in the verses and explosive screaming and electric guitar distortion in the chorus – essentially anthems for a generation that suppressed a seething rage beneath a layer of apathy.[290]

[289] Of course this was assimilated into mainstream fashion. Designers, for instance, began to sell pre-ripped and faded jeans. And Cobain's trademark thumb hole in the cuff was cut and hemmed in a factory.

[290] In France, this generation is known as Génération Bof, the "whatever generation" – an obvious reference to the colloquial use of "whatever" as an expression of apathy.

Naturally, not all Gen Xers experienced it to the same degree, but disillusionment, frustration, and anger are a few of the emotional touchstones that coloured the zeitgeist of the early 1990s – the period in which McCandless undertook his "spiritual pilgrimage." And although he was by no means a "slacker"[291] , or a participant in popular culture with regard to music or fashion, he could certainly be described as disillusioned, searching for authenticity, a renouncer of societal conformity, and by turns quietly and vociferously angry. And his contempt for society and authority, primarily his father's, created a slow-burning rage, which Krakauer compares to his own view: "Like McCandless, figures of male authority aroused in me a confusing medley of corked fury and hunger to please."[292] Though he spoke effusively on topics he loved, such as nature and certain authors,[293] he tended to mask his anger with a bristling silence, as Carine McCandless explains:

> … he wouldn't tell us what was on his mind and he spent more time by himself. … Chris was the sort of person who brooded about things … If something bothered him, he wouldn't come right out and say it. He'd keep it to himself, harbouring his resentment, letting the bad feelings build and build.[294]

Silence was a kind of power play. McCandless knew he could appease neither his fury nor his father with a violent expression of his anger, so he remained silent to gain a form of

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[291] *Slacker* is a 1991 film by Richard Linklater that captured the apathy and aimlessness of '90s youth culture, and became a term used to describe a subset of the youth in that decade, who were cynical and uninterested in politics or social causes. 'Slacker,' Oxford English Dictionary, accessed 21 July 2014, www.oxforddictionaries.com.

[292] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 134.

[293] According to Westerberg, Alex "used to sit right there at the end of the bar and tell us these amazing stories of his travels. He could talk for hours." Ibid., 16.
Burres said, "At the swap meet he'd talk and talk and talk to everybody who came by." Ibid., 45.
Westerberg's on-again, off-again girlfriend, Borah said, "Alex talked a lot when we got together…" Ibid., 64.
Westerberg's mom: "We talked for hours about books … He went on and on about Mark Twain." Ibid., 68.

[294] Ibid., 121.

leverage.[295] Carine and Krakauer trace this deep anger and bitterness back to what Chris discovered on a solo road trip to El Segundo in California – the place where he was born, and where he lived till he was six. From old family friends he learned that his father's split from his first wife had not been "a clean or amicable parting." For a period, Walt McCandless had "[divided] his time between two households," even fathering another child with his first wife, two years after Chris was born. "Lies were told and then exposed, begetting more lies to explain away the initial deceptions."[296] In the film, this is explained by Carine's voice-over, which includes the lines:

> Their fraudulent marriage, and our father's denial of this other son, was, for Chris, a murder of every day's truth. ... These revelations struck at the core of Chris's sense of identity. They made his entire childhood seem like fiction. Chris never told them he knew, and made me promise silence as well.

For McCandless, the fact that this had been buried in the past, hidden from himself and Carine, was unforgivable. Though he told his sister, he never revealed to his parents that he knew this family secret. Instead, he quietly judged them for a lie that he extrapolated to denounce the deception of all forms of authority. An example of this appears in the film when McCandless's guard of silence comes down in a drunken rant to Westerberg about the ills of society. He starts with an excited speech about getting into the wild, but then says that when he comes back from Alaska, he might write a book "about getting out of this sick society!" He rages about people treating each other badly, saying he can't understand why there is so much "judgement, control. All that – the whole spectrum!" Westerberg asks, "What 'people' are we talking about?" McCandless responds, "You know, parents,

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[295] cf. Sattel, 'Men, Inexpressiveness, and Power,' in *Language, Gender and Society,* ed. Barrie Thorne et al. (1983), 119-124.
[296] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 121.

hypocrites, politicians, pricks." That fact that he assumed the name Alexander Supertramp in lieu of his family name is an obvious example of how he sought to dissociate from his parents, to create an identity outside of family. It seems McCandless strongly associated parental and societal control – seeing both as hollow and hypocritical forms of power. Krakauer writes: "Not infrequently during their visits, Franz [the elderly man whom Chris befriended] recalls, McCandless's face would darken with anger and he'd fulminate about his parents or politicians or the endemic idiocy of mainstream American life."[297]

And although he probably did not wear his faded jeans as a fashion statement, McCandless was certainly anti-consumerism. His disdain for wealth as a mark of success was just more extreme than the average grunge-listening youth. Krakauer refers to him as "the teenage Tolstoyan, [who] believed that wealth was shameful, corrupting, inherently evil."[298] In a postcard to Westerberg, which in the film appears as text on screen with voice-over and a scene of Chris running with horses, he exclaims: "My days were more exciting when I was penniless." McCandless's reaction against the "greed is good" culture is also in stark contrast with hegemonic masculinity's emphasis on competition and dominance in terms of financial prosperity. This is another sense in which McCandless must renounce a tenet of masculinity that is reinforced by societal conventions – a clear echo of Thoreau, who in 'Life Without Principle', declares: "I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business,"[299] and later in the essay, "A man had better starve at once than lose his innocence in the process of getting his bread."[300]

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297 Ibid., 53.
298 Ibid., 115.
299 Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 712.
300 Ibid., 721.

McCandless would do all he could to remain untouched and unsoiled by the transactions of society – security and comfort at the cost of his soul. He donated his life savings to charity and later burnt what was at the time his last $123 in cash when he abandoned his vehicle – a symbolic gesture of cutting his ties with society. His destruction of legal tender made it impossible for him to transact with mainstream society. It was a gesture that, as Krakauer notes, "would have done both Thoreau and Tolstoy proud,"[301] as if they are paternal ghosts – male authority figures watching and approving of his actions, like the father he never respected.

Krakauer and Penn also preside over his life in a way. They frame it – by turns approving and recreating it. However, their motivation includes a kind of vicarious participation. Krakauer, a late Boomer born in 1954, admits that he identifies strongly with McCandless and even devotes a portion of the book to describing his own near-death experience in the wilderness when he was in his youth. Penn, born only eight years before McCandless, is of the same generation, which to some extent explains his identification with the story and his enduring passion for the project. This strong bond is perhaps the reason both Krakauer and Penn made such an immense effort to be faithful to the 'truth' about McCandless and the integrity he stood for – they were attempting to mine out something in themselves. These ideas of 'truth' and 'authenticity' are perhaps marketing tools to some extent. These concepts helps to sell books and movie tickets by integrating the product with their subject, Chris McCandless, whose identity it too easily frame. His sister summarised him in one sentence

[301] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 29.

that pivoted on his "quest for authenticity"[302] – a passion I mentioned earlier regarding his Thoreauvian desire for truth. Krakauer "spent more than a year retracing the convoluted path that led to his death … chasing down details of his peregrinations with an interest that bordered on obsession."[303] Penn waited nearly a decade on the McCandless family to give their blessing before he started production, and took great pains in his attempt to present the story accurately by working closely with Krakauer and Carine, convincing Emile Hirsch (who played Chris) to do all his own stunts, and shooting the whole film on location, including Alaska, despite much higher production costs. Emile Hirsch also lost 40 pounds to play McCandless in the emaciated state of his final days.[304]

Another facet that attempts to lend "authenticity" to the film, to make it faithful to its historical milieu, is the soundtrack, dominated by songs variously composed or covered by Eddie Vedder, the lead singer of Pearl Jam – arguably the most successful grunge rock band. An icon of alternative rock, Vedder appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1993 with the headline "All The Rage – Angry young rockers like Pearl Jam give voice to the passions and fears of a generation." Of course, much like Kurt Cobain, Vedder eschewed publicity, and was upset about the magazine cover, as he had declined to participate. One of the first songs he wrote for Pearl Jam was "Alive", which tells the story of a young man who, like Vedder himself, learns that he had been lied to about his paternity and that his real father is dead. This kind of personal revelation in lyrics, and renunciation of attention-seeking rock 'n roll excess, typified the search for authenticity in a lot of grunge bands, and is closely related

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302 The Oprah Winfrey Show, 'Oscar Winner Sean Penn: His First Trip to "The Oprah Show,"' 20 September 2007. Accessed 15 August 2014, www.youtube.com.
303 Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), x.
304 McGrath, 'Mother Nature's Restless Sons,' *The New York Times*, 16 September 2007, accessed 15 August 2014, www.nytimes.com.

to McCandless's own quest – born to an extent from a mistrust of the previous generation and authority in general. And so when Vedder's lone baritone growls over stripped-down instrumentation, he lends a sense of authenticity; he lends the voice of that generation to the often silent onscreen presence of Chris McCandless. Only four years older than Chris, he explains in an interview how strongly he identified with McCandless during the songwriting process: "It was startling how easy it was for me to get into his head. I found it to be uncomfortable how easy it was, because I thought I'd grown up."[305] The lyrics are written in the first person, which not only works to draw the audience into McCandless's perspective, but also indicates Vedder's keen identification with him.

Vedder, Penn, and Krakauer all seem to identify closely with McCandless. Their endeavours to be faithful to his story are also an attempt to be faithful to their younger selves, the ideals they may have relinquished to an extent. This project was an opportunity to reclaim and reenergise not only their ideals, but their youth and the associated virile danger-lust masculinity. Penn, for example, in a classic case of male daring and competition, challenged Emile Hirsch to do the helmetless ride through white water rapids himself, as opposed to allowing a stunt double to make the extremely dangerous run. Hirsch turned it around and said he would do it if Penn did it first, which he did. It illustrates the point Kimmel makes about masculinity constantly needing to be proved – often through competition. Even though Penn is clearly the alpha male in the situation – older, richer, more famous, director of the film, employer of Hirsch – when he is challenged, he cannot refuse. However, this

[305] Cohen, 'Q&A: Penn, Vedder go where the "Wild" things are,' 27 October 2007, accessed 13 August 2014, www.reuters.com.

seems to be a rare instance of Penn's dominance being tested. Hirsch explains in an interview when asked about working with the director:

> It was a very challenging experience. Sean demands the most out of everyone who works with him so I wasn't allowed to cut any corners ever. He would have me do things the hardest way they could be done, but it was such a wonderful experience to be challenged in that way. One day Sean made me climb up a snowy hill with a 30-pound backpack over and over. And he wouldn't let anyone help me when I got stuck in the snow. I had to dig my way out.[306]

Whether or not Hirsch is exaggerating here is less interesting than the fact that either way, there's a performance of masculinity taking place. It might be for the approval of the director, and perhaps it is a sign of the reinvigorated masculine atmosphere created by this this film's production process with its emphasis on authentic experience, location shooting, and actors doing their own stunts. But it could also be a little bravado for the sake of the film's audience, and the readers of the interview. Hirsch not only shares in the masculine capital of McCandless, he adds to it.

McCandless's journals seem to anticipate this future audience – arbiters of freedom and nonconformity such as Penn and Vedder – with his use of third person narration suggesting a reader other than himself. Much like Thoreau's imagined company and ideal reader, other men who have deliberately abandoned society in order to spend time alone in the wilderness have created a similar audience – a sympathetic sounding board for their isolated consciousness. Two examples are found in the documentary films *Alone in the Wilderness* (2004) and *Grizzly Man* (2005). In the spring of 1968, 51-year-old Dick Proenneke went to live alone in the Alaskan wild. He lived there for over thirty years, and captured a good deal

306 Hirsch, 'Talking With Emile Hirsch.' *Washington Post*, 21 September 2007, accessed 13 August 2014, www.washingtonpost.com.

of his experience using a 16 mm camera. Portions of this footage were compiled to create the television special *Alone in the Wilderness*, which aired on PBS. He built himself a log cabin in the remote valley known as Twin Lakes – an area the film refers to as "yet unchanged by man." Unlike McCandless, Proenneke was an experienced and highly skilled outdoorsman, but an interesting similarity lies in the way they chose to tell their stories from a third person perspective. Though his daily journal entries were in the first person, Proenneke decided to shoot his film document as if it was carried out by an invisible film crew, and as if he was unaware of the camera. Using dozens of tripod setups he records his progress as he builds the cabin. He also has numerous shots of himself either walking away from camera, heading heroically out towards some magnificent vista, or walking back past the camera – never looking directly at the lens. There is even a moment where, as he walks off with his back to the camera, he turns and looks suddenly to his right, allowing for an eyeline match cut-away to one of the many animals he meticulously records in his journal. Of course, the one shot that is never shown, always removed in the edit and yet haunting each scene, is the one where he turns right around and trudges back to the camera to turn it off.

The PBS film uses selected reading from his journal as voice-over, which includes his early objectives for living alone in the wilderness – spirited statements such as:

> This was something I had to do … I was here to test myself. What was I capable of? Could I truly enjoy my own company for an entire year? And was I equal to everything this wild land could throw at me?

His competitive tone of survival despite suffering, and a desire to test his himself against the natural elements, also suggests a consciousness of his heroic centrality in a narrative. Paired with shots of him striding out into dramatic landscapes, his words position him as a solitary

hero, leaving behind the trappings of civilization in a way that strongly resembles the kind of self-styled hero persona assumed by Timothy Treadwell, as depicted in the Werner Herzog documentary, *Grizzly Man*. The film contains a significant amount of footage shot by Treadwell himself, documenting his days lived mostly alone in Katmai National Park in Alaska. Although it differs from Proenneke's style, featuring predominantly handheld shots, with Treadwell often speaking into camera, there is a similar sense in which he sets himself up as the hero in a "good versus evil" narrative, battling against a mostly imagined villain – a conspiracy of government, poachers, and society at large. He calls himself "the kind warrior."

Of course, not all men who seek solitude take up this attitude. There is the recent example of the man sometimes referred to as the North Pond Hermit, Christopher Knight, who spent 27 years living alone in a tent. Though he stayed on the edge of a community, no one had any contact with him. He never spoke to anyone, and spent his days reading and meditating. The only reason people suspected his existence was because their food and household items went missing. For almost three decades, Knight stole what he needed to survive, committing over 1,000 burglaries before he was finally arrested in April 2013.[307]

Unlike Treadwell and Proenneke, Knight had no interest in an audience – imagined or otherwise. He saw no need to document his life. In his mind it made no sense to seek the

[307] Finkel, 'The Strange and Curious Tale of the Last True Hermit.' *GQ*, September 2014, accessed 24 September 2014, www.gq.com.

attention of a society he had chosen to ignore. In an interview,[308] he dismisses Thoreau as a "dilettante," contrasting the writer with "true hermits" like himself:

> True hermits, according to Chris, do not write books, do not have friends, and do not answer questions. I asked why he didn't at least keep a journal in the woods. Chris scoffed. "I expected to die out there. Who would read my journal? You? I'd rather take it to my grave." The only reason he was talking to me now, he said, is because he was locked in jail and needed practice interacting with others.[309]

If Knight 'cultivates' his own wildness or heroic identity, it is not for an audience other than himself. After repeated questioning along the lines of his personal experience of solitude, the laconic hermit finally relented on the ninth and final interview. He explains, with an uncharacteristic poetry, the connection between performance and identity, and how both of these fall away in the absence of an audience:

> "I did examine myself," he said. "Solitude did increase my perception. But here's the tricky thing – when I applied my increased perception to myself, I lost my identity. With no audience, no one to perform for, I was just there. There was no need to define myself; I became irrelevant. The moon was the minute hand, the seasons the hour hand. I didn't even have a name. I never felt lonely."[310]

McCandless, however, does not lose his identity. He deliberately discards it, and then creates it anew. Self-definition seems very important to McCandless, and he clearly does attempt to define his identity by referring to refers to himself in the third person, and creating a kind of "heroic wanderer" persona under the name Alexander Supertramp. For example, in his

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[308] Journalist, Michael Finkel, corresponded with Knight and visited him nine times while he was in prison. The subsequent article was published in the September 2014 edition of men's magazine, *GQ*.
[309] Finkel, 'The Strange and Curious Tale of the Last True Hermit.' *GQ*, September 2014, accessed 24 September 2014, www.gq.com.
[310] Ibid.

"exultant declaration of independence," he carves his own mythology in solemn upper-case lettering[311] on a sheet of weathered plywood in the old bus outside Sushana River:

> TWO YEARS HE WALKS THE EARTH. NO PHONE, NO POOL, NO PETS, NO CIGARETTES. ULTIMATE FREEDOM. AN EXTREMIST. AN AESTHETIC VOYAGER WHOSE HOME IS THE ROAD…. AND NOW AFTER TWO RAMBLING YEARS COMES THE FINAL AND GREATEST ADVENTURE. THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE TO KILL THE FALSE BEING WITHIN AND VICTORIOUSLY CONCLUDE THE SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE. …
>
> ALEXANDER SUPERTRAMP
> MAY 1992[312]

This mini manifesto of the "aesthetic voyager" includes an allusion to "King of the Road," written and originally recorded by country singer Roger Miller in 1964. The lyrics tell of a hobo who despite being poor revels in his freedom, describing himself humorously as the "king of the road."[313] McCandless is deliberate in styling his wanderings as a personal quest; his seemingly aimless wanderings "hummed with meaning and purpose,"[314] and he is highly aware of the narrative nature of his journey, which he marks along the way with his name and the date. He is conscious of his influences, which include Davies, and even his reference to the lyrics of "King of the Road," position him historically among men of a similar persuasion – men who created an ideal of freedom from civilization. Of course, not all of these men are real. In the case of Jack London, for example, it is his fictional characters and idealised presentation of the wilderness that captured McCandless's imagination, as opposed to his actual life. Rather, there is a sense in which McCandless is part of a greater mythology

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311 This stylisation is picked up by Krakauer in the book, and is also used for all the text that appears in Penn's film.
312 Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 162.
313 "Trailer for sale or rent, rooms to let, fifty cents.
No phone, no pool, no pets, I ain't got no cigarettes
Ah, but, two hours of pushin' broom
Buys an eight by twelve four-bit room
I'm a man of means by no means, king of the road."
314 Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 183.

of freedom. And he was not only aware of it, but actively integrating himself into that particular narrative. Both Krakauer and Penn recognise this with the use of the following quotation, from Wallace Stegner's *The American West as Living Space*, in a chapter heading and voice-over respectively:

> 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 obligation, with absolute freedom, and the road has always led west.[315]

Although most of the film's voice-over is by Jena Malone playing Carine, this quotation is read by Hirsch, the voice we associate with McCandless, thereby maintaining the idea of McCandless assimilating himself into the American mythology of the road leading westwards. This self-mythologising process is perhaps most overtly demonstrated in the leather belt McCandless made under the tutelage of Franz, an "accomplished leatherworker."[316] Krakauer describes the belt in detail:

> McCandless produced a tooled leather belt, on which he created an artful pictorial record of his wanderings. *ALEX* is inscribed at the belt's left end; then the initials C.J.M. (for Christopher Johnson McCandless) frame a skull and crossbones. Across the strip of cowhide one sees a rendering of a two-lane blacktop, a NO U-TURN sign, a thunderstorm producing a flash flood that engulfs a car, a hitchhiker's thumb, an eagle, the Sierra Nevada, salmon cavorting in the Pacific Ocean, the Pacific Coast Highway from Oregon to Washington, the Rocky Mountains, Montana wheat fields, a South Dakota rattlesnake, Westerberg's house in Carthage, the Colorado River, a gale in the Gulf of California, a canoe beached beside a tent, Las Vegas, the initials T.C.D., Morro Bay, Astoria, and at the buckle end, finally, the letter *N* (presumably representing north).[317]

By assigning symbols to his experiences, McCandless lends them a legendary quality – they are reimagined to have a meaning beyond themselves, like ancient markings on a wall. The

[315] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 15.
[316] Ibid., 53.
[317] Ibid.

completion of his self-mythologising process is reached in the oral retelling of his story, as he shares his experiences in the oral tradition. According to Westerberg, "Alex used to sit at the bar in the Cabaret and read that belt for hours on end … like he was translating hieroglyphics for us."[318] McCandless tells his life like a legend with a sense of drama, possible exaggerations, and forming links between real geographical locations and graphic representations – signposts for his story. The illustrations on leather also evoke the legends of saints captured in mosaic or stained glass, rich in symbol and gravitas.

Of course, the mythologising process does not end with McCandless. It is picked up by Krakauer and Penn who order his life into a narrative format complete with neat chapters. Interestingly, while every chapter in the book is named after a location, such as Annandale, The Stampede Trail, Alaska, etc., Penn's film is structured in such a way that draws attention to its nature as narrative. Like the leather belt, the story is signposted. Chapters appear as superimposed text such as: "Chapter 1: MY OWN BIRTH,"[319] where the possessive pronoun reinforces the idea of McCandless being personally aware of his narrative. It creates a sense of intimacy with the storyteller, possibly causing the audience to be more trusting. And it perpetuates the sense of the oral story, crystalised in Vedder's folk-rock[320] soundtrack. Occasionally the songs describe the action, as in the sequence where McCandless decides to return home. He leaves the bus and we hear a line from "No Ceiling": "I leave here believing more than I had." Most of the lyrics, however, are more explorations and explanations of his

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[318] Ibid., 69.
[319] Chapter 2: ADOLESCENCE; Chapter 3: MANHOOD; Chapter 4: FAMILY; Final Chapter: GETTING OF WISDOM
[320] The music reviewer, Thom Jurek, describes the songs as "folksy, rootsy tunes where rock & roll makes fleeting appearances." Jurek, 'Eddie Vedder – *Into the Wild* (Original Soundtrack) Review,' accessed 15 August 2014, www.allmusic.com.

attitudes, as well as his psychological state. The song "Guaranteed", for example, is a manifesto of sorts. It outlines, amongst other things, his desire for solitude ("Don't come closer or I'll have to go"), his denunciation of materialism as a prison ("Everyone I come across in cages they bought"), his independent thinking – a self-sufficient, closed loop of questions and answers ("got a mind full of questions and a teacher in my soul"), and his rejection of impersonal rules ("I knew all the rules, but the rules did not know me"). The song "Long Nights," which opens with the line: "Have no fear, for when I'm alone, I'll be better off than I was before," has a courageous "never fear" quality to it that works to establish him as an isolated hero: sweeping helicopter shots of snowy mountain peaks, dissolving to a lone eagle in the sky, and then a tilt down from another peak to find McCandless striding towards the camera in the foreground of a vast white landscape, as Vedder's voice rises dramatically. There is even a classic low-angle "hero shot" where the camera semi-circles around him as he stares off into the distance.

These depictions of McCandless in nature are sharply distinct from his experiences of city life. Though he is dwarfed by the jagged, snow-capped mountains above and the immense white landscape all around him, emphasised by several extreme long shots, he retains a heroic strength. Hirsch's performance and the simple fact of his solitude in the face of severe environmental conditions lend a sense of courage to his character, for although the conditions are harsh and the landscape unsuited to man, there is the impression that he may be equal to the challenge. This is, of course, in stark contrast with his physical state, devastated by starvation, at the end of the film. However, it is also contrasted with representations of McCandless in urban environments, which, ideally, are designed for the

comfort and convenience of man, and yet this is where we see McCandless alienated and weak.

From the outset of the film nature and society are contrasted cinematically. In the opening shots, we see the Alaskan environment from a moving train – though the rivers are frozen, the rocks and trees partially covered in snow, there is a vitality to the landscape rushing by. This movement is immediately emphasised by its juxtaposition with a series of static shots around the small city of Fairbanks. As the train enters the black of a tunnel, we cut to: a train station, a grimy cocktail bar, a dilapidated factory, a restaurant, an old Masonic temple – none of which show any signs of life. There are no people, and the only movement we see is some smoke wafting gently from the factory. The buildings are in a general state of disrepair, suggesting decay. They are also framed tightly, creating a sense of parochial suffocation. And beneath Vedder's elegiac humming and lyricless vocalisations, we hear the sound of a train moving through a tunnel, as if by some diegetic delay from the earlier shot; it would be an echo if there had been an original. The sound is haunting and accentuates the "ghost town" atmosphere of stagnation and death. It is both the lifeless existence McCandless was running from, and a foreshadowing of his eventual end.

A similar collocation occurs about twenty minutes into the film when Alexander Supertramp first sets out on his "aesthetic voyage." It begins with him writing a cheque, donating his life savings to OXFAM, and then cutting up his driver's licence, student card and bank card. This latter detail, incidentally, is not factual, since McCandless's wallet containing all his identification, was discovered by local resident Will Forsberg in a backpack left in the bus on

the Stampede Trail in the fall of 1992.[321] This and several other discrepancies are revealed in Lamothe's documentary, which I mentioned earlier. Though I have no intention of trying to unmask "the real" Christopher McCandless in contrast to his representations in the book and film, this particular inaccuracy is interesting because the filmmakers were so earnest about authenticity in other regards. The decision to fabricate an event in an otherwise factual film seems to accentuate the importance of this scene in terms of its narrative purpose. And then, as if the visual metaphor expressing his severance from the security of society is not obvious enough, he dramatically sets fire to his social security card. The flame and curling paper edges linger in the dissolve to the skyscrapers of Atlanta, and the camera tilts down to reveal the yellow Datsun swinging round a bend in the freeway, as a guitar begins to jangle triumphantly. McCandless is smiling in the driver's seat and "Chapter 1: MY OWN BIRTH" is superimposed over the shot. We see him in a close-up with a look of concentration and a slight smile of satisfaction, followed by a cut to a view of the cityscape through the rear window of the Datsun. Again, the city, like Fairbanks in the opening scenes, is presented in a tight, parochial frame, which is immediately contrasted by an extreme long shot from a helicopter swooping in on the Datsun as it ostensibly heads west out of Atlanta, crossing a bridge over the Chattahoochee River. However, the bridge is actually over the Colorado River – the state line between Arizona and California – almost 2,000 miles from the previous shot, and less than 200 miles from the south shore of Lake Mead, where McCandless eventually abandons his vehicle. Still, despite this subtle elliptical editing, transporting us thousands of kilometres in a single cut, the conceptual juxtaposition created by the edit establishes a clear link between leaving the big city and crossing the river, the Rubicon, the

[321] Lamothe, 'The Call of the Wild: *Into the Wild* Debunked,' accessed 15 August 2014, www.tifilms.com.

point of no return. This metaphorically reiterates the previous scene in which McCandless cuts up the cards that would allow him to return and be smoothly reintegrated into the society he has chosen to leave. Either way, his die is cast and the bridge crossing is followed by another helicopter shot of the lone yellow vehicle hurtling along an open highway into the sunset. From the aerial view, the car is dwarfed by the rugged landscape, and warmed by the twilight glow. The city is represented as towering, yet insular and oppressive, whereas the road leads west towards nature, wide-open spaces, and freedom.

About three minutes of screen time later he passes through Reno to the sound of Canned Heat's "Going Up the Country" with such overly fitting lyrics as: "I'm gonna leave this city, got to get away." His relationship to the city is not always so unambiguous, however. In a strange reversal of the hunter-gatherer model, where men had to leave the security of the village in order to procure the necessities of survival from the forest, McCandless must abandon the relative comfort and freedom of the wild in order to hunt and forage for supplies in the city before returning to nature. The seeming contradiction or tenuous equilibrium is captured by the text of a postcard he wrote to Wayne Westerberg, which is superimposed over Fairbanks shots in the third minute of the film: "I'm prepared and have stocked all necessary comforts to live off the land for a few months." Unfortunately "all necessary comforts," which were fairly meagre and, in the end, less than the required amount, came at a cost to his integrity. He had to compromise on his values to some extent and conform to the rules of the capitalist system he despised,[322] in order to earn the money

[322] In the film he says to Franz, "I think careers are a 20th century invention and I don't want one." In a less serious scene, his supervisor at Burger King asks him to conform to uniform code by wearing socks.

he needed. He works in a Las Vegas restaurant[323] and flips burgers at the Bullhead McDonald's (or Burger King in the film) for the sole purpose of earning cash – precisely the kind of labour Thoreau condemns in his essay, 'Life Without Principle':

> The ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward. To have done anything by which you earned money *merely* is to have been truly idle or worse.[324]

Despite these forays into these thicker concentrations of society, at great moral cost to him personally, McCandless does not try to compensate for this cost by forming close relational bonds with people in the city. Perhaps it is because he sees the work as a cold transaction, a necessary evil, or because he wants to be able to leave without rending any emotional ties. Whatever the reasons, he remains alienated and alone, though surrounded by people. Lori Zarza, the second assistant manager at the Bullhead McDonald's explains, "I don't think he ever hung out with any of the employees after work or anything. When he talked, he was always going on about trees and nature and weird stuff like that. We all thought he was missing a few screws." [325] In nature he experiences both exultation and despair, whereas, in the city scenes depicted in the film, he is shown exclusively in various states of dejection and bewilderment. Certainly his most extended encounter with an urban environment in the film is depicted in the Los Angeles scenes. Once again they are preceded by wilderness scenes – by turns jubilant (he leaps into rivers and runs with wild mustangs), reflective (he writes notes and letters), tranquil and beautiful (sunset by the river and whales passing beneath his kayak on the Sea of Cortez), and treacherous (porting his kayak through the desert only to have a sandstorm blow it away, and the mention of having lived in a cave for 36 days).

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[323] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 37.
[324] Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 714 (author's emphasis).
[325] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 41.

He hops a train, returning to the city out of desperation after charmingly informing the border authority that he's "eaten enough sand to send [him] back to the city." He leaps from the train upon arrival in the grey city and stealthily moves across the station, finally entering the city by crawling through a concrete drain pipe – like a Lewis Carroll rabbit hole in reverse, going from Wonderland to 'reality', which is presented as having a kind of hallucinogenic quality through Eric Gautier's "distressed" photography and Jay Cassidy's editing techniques. In an interview, Cassidy explains that the filmmakers were trying to convey McCandless's "personal revulsion at civilization… and his idea to find a purer state for his own life." In editing terms, Cassidy points to the "warping" of time by using "little freeze-frames tucked in, and the little speed-ups and slow-downs."[326]

The score is somnolent guitar strumming and we see point of view shots tilted up at, or panning across, looming buildings, followed by close-ups of McCandless's dazed expression. We are more aware of his shabby state – not only in contrast to the well-dressed city people, but also through the similarity to other homeless people. In the city, McCandless is no longer a wild-at-heart, bearded adventurer with forgivably unkempt hair and mud-stained appearance; he is simply another vagrant, waiting in line for a bed and a meal: Supertramp drained of his powers. The only respite from the melancholy, the aching urban hopelessness, is a friendly social worker at the Los Angeles Mission, who is charmed by the McCandless smile and polite manner. But even with her cheerful disposition, she cannot connect with McCandless enough to persuade him to stay – barricaded more by a relational distance than

[326] Kaufman, 'Out on Location Editing *Into the Wild*' (2007), accessed 15 August 2014, www.studiodaily.com.

the glass partition. He goes on his way, and she returns to a more bureaucratic demeanour, addressing the next man in line with: "You know the drill."

McCandless moves out onto the street for an evening stroll, which takes on a somewhat nightmarish quality – woozy camera movement accentuated by the editor's "warping" of time and an eerie score. Suddenly, he is confronted by a vision. He sees a man wearing a suit, sipping a drink and making conversation in a bar, which seems more upmarket for the disparity with the general poverty, filth, and urban decay that has been presented so far. The face of the man in the suit transforms into his own. We see McCandless with Wall Street hair slicked back, laughing with a hint of self-satisfaction. He then looks up and seemingly makes eye contact with the vagrant McCandless, and the smile fades into a look of judgement and a pointed finger. He is reminded of the reason he left the city to begin with – not the filth, but the false lustre of the opposite. He is repulsed by the role he would be forced to play for the sake of being sociable; it is the insincerity described by Berdyaev in *Solitude and Society*:

> The Ego of everyday social life is not the authentic Ego; this is, indeed, the fundamental theme underlying Tolstoy's literary work.[327] For this reason, it is no easy matter to discover the authentic human Ego, to strip off its "social" disguises. In society man is invariably an actor, he lives up to the standard of conduct imposed upon him by any given social position; and if he acts his part too well, he has some difficulty in rediscovering his essential Ego.[328]

McCandless immediately flees the city, and sets out to strip off his social guises, which can only be achieved in the absence of the social. Solitude is his chosen cure for the inauthentic.

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[327] It is interesting to note Berdyaev's mention of Tolstoy, who was such a strong influence on McCandless.

[328] Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society* (1938), 98.

As he clearly states in his manifesto-of-sorts, which he carved into plywood, he is determined "to kill the false being within."[329]

His means of immediate escape from the city is the same way he came in: illegally hiding on a freight train. But society does not allow him to escape so easily. There is a price. About thirty seconds after "Chapter Three: MANHOOD" appears on screen, we see McCandless ripped from the train, brutally beaten, and threatened with death by an older male. After the vicious attack, the man moves from violent, threatening language to the more formal, legal-sounding phrase "violating our liability," which he offers as the reason for the disciplinary violence on behalf of the United States Railroad. Both the violent and the legal language are designed to intimidate and establish dominance, which he clearly achieves, as McCandless meekly responds with "Yes, sir," and "No, sir." The scene serves to emphasise the conflict between McCandless and the rules of society. It is not only he that rejects the city; society, to some degree, spurns him in return. This sense of McCandless being disenchanted with society, and enjoying his solitude, is further underlined by the song that plays directly after the scene – "Society," written by Jerry Hannan and sung by Eddie Vedder. The sentiment is particularly clear in the lyrics: "Society, you're a crazy breed. I hope you're not lonely without me."

The scene also works to develop his alternative masculinity, for although we see him beaten and bloodied by an obviously dominant male, we also see him stand up, and continue on his journey. The scene dissolves to McCandless sitting at the side of the road, hitchhiking with a determined look on his bruised face – including a bloodied lip and an eye swollen shut. He

[329] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 162.

may not be the traditional male aggressor, but he conforms to the "stoic endurance of suffering" as described by Roger Horrocks: "masochism, self-destruction, self-denial" thereby proving "the ability to suffer and remain cut off from human feeling."[330] . Following these two scenes, the "Manhood" chapter is dominated by sequences of McCandless isolated in the Alaskan wilderness where he kills a moose, fails to preserve the meat, and is overcome by guilt. The nature scenes are punctuated by shots of McCandless haunting the outskirts of cities, hitchhiking, spending a night under a bridge, and working in a Burger King kitchen – where he is reprimanded for not wearing socks. In the natural environment, even when he makes mistakes, he is free and responsible. He is independent, able to define himself and his own sense of "manhood". This is contrasted with the scenes in or near cities where he is forced to rely on others for transport and wages. He is also emasculated by his female supervisor who, very sweetly, but also patronisingly – almost maternally – explains that he needs to wear socks.

Following "MANHOOD," which at fifteen minutes is the shortest chapter in the film, we are introduced to a kind of ideal community in "Chapter 4: FAMILY." And, previously, McCandless is shown to enjoy some measure of friendship and community living in Carthage. Krakauer explains his affection for the small farming town as follows:

> McCandless quickly became enamored of Carthage. He liked the community's stasis, its plebian virtues and unassuming mien. The place was a back eddy, a pool of jetsam beyond the pull of the main current, and that suited him just fine.[331]

[330] Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities* (1994), 42.
[331] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 18.

Though he loved unbridled nature and hated the city, McCandless seemed to find some contentment in liminal spaces between the two. Carthage and the desert outside Salton City receive some attention in the film as places offering respite from the mainstream values of more developed, urban society. However, it is the old navy air base three miles outside of Niland, known as the "Slabs," that stands out as an ideal picture of human society in the film. Though it may have shared the "plebian virtues and unassuming mien" of Carthage, the Slabs certainly had none of its stability or cultural inertia. Krakauer describes this unusual congregation of nomads in the desert of southern California:

> Come November, as the weather turns cold across the rest of the country, some five thousand snowbirds and drifters and sundry vagabonds congregate in this otherworldly setting to live on the cheap under the sun. The Slabs functions as the seasonal capital of a teeming itinerant society – a tolerant, rubber-tired culture comprising the retired, the exiled, the destitute, the perpetually unemployed. Its constituents are men and women of all ages, folks on the dodge from collection agencies, relationships gone sour, the law or the IRS, Ohio winters, the middle-class grind.[332]

What society could be better suited to McCandless than one that is fundamentally against mainstream values? The Slabs is a community founded by people who rejected conformity for whatever reason, and so it is the natural home for the wanderer – albeit a temporary home. In the film, "Slab City" is established with fast-paced music, which turns out to be diegetic – a performance by a character called Insane Cain, a kind of bard, who introduces "The Slabs" in song, thereby humanising the environment. It is not an established society, but one that is transient, in constant flux with itinerants breezing in and out. Even the homes are mobile – a society on the move. This is in stark contrast with previous depictions of society as oppressive, stagnant, and insular. Unlike in Fairbanks, here, we actually see

[332] Ibid., 44.

people, moving people, in the establishing shots. We see flags fluttering in the wind, cars passing by, mountains in the background, and a great deal of bright colour. The cuts are rapid and there is variable framing of the same subject between cuts. Some jump cuts flare in and out of white. The community is represented as vibrant, throbbing with life.

The film also expands on a romantic affiliation he is said to have had with a seventeen-year-old[333] girl named Tracy living in Slab City. Krakauer spends a paragraph on the episode, recounted by Jan Burres, and builds up to her assertion that even though he had no interest in Tracy, and left her "broken-hearted" because she was "too young for him," he did socialise and make relational connections in this community. Her account shows that he was "no recluse":

> He had a *good* time when he was around people, a *real* good time. … He must have met six or seven dozen people in Niland, and he was friendly with every one of them. He needed his solitude at times, but he wasn't a hermit.[334]

This affinity for community sets up what Penn and Krakauer both style as a dramatic epiphany about the nature of happiness which may have spurred him to return to civilisation – potentially with a desire to "become a member of the human community."[335] Krakauer states in the book that McCandless read the following passage in *Doctor Zhivago*:

> And so it turned out that only a life similar to the life of those around us, merging with it without a ripple, is genuine life, and that an unshared happiness is not happiness. … And this was most vexing of all.

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[333] She is sixteen in the movie.
[334] Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 45/6 (author's emphasis).
[335] Ibid., 188.

Next to it, he noted: "HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED."[336] Tragically, McCandless never made it out of the wild. The high flow of the Teklanika River and eventually failing health prevented him from leaving and reconnecting with the ones who make happiness real. This realisation is more dramatic for its opposition to his previous, strongly professed view, which he expressed in a letter to the elderly gentleman known as Ronald Franz. McCandless brazenly admonished the old man, telling him he should "make a radical change in [his] lifestyle," and he also offered some advice about the nature of joy, which contradicts his Pasternak-induced epiphany:

> The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon … You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships.[337]

A few pages later, Krakauer quotes Anthony Storr's *Solitude: A Return to the Self* on avoidance behaviour, which Storr suggests could be expressed in the life of an adult "person whose principal need was to find some kind of meaning and order in life which was not entirely, or even chiefly, dependent upon interpersonal relationships."[338] Having established this early on in the book, the epiphany appears 130 pages later as a climactic shift in our view of McCandless.

In the film, Penn includes a similar sequence, where McCandless is seen reading Tolstoy's *Family Happiness* and, through editing, the word "people" literally leaps off the page, highlighting the thrust of the passage which concerns the definition of happiness as a life

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336 Ibid.
337 Ibid., 58.
338 Ibid., 62.

lived for others.[339] The scene is included in the "FAMILY" chapter, marking it as an indication of a social instinct in McCandless, and a desire to be happy, but also shows an interesting structural departure from the book. While Krakauer describes this epiphany long after the interaction with Franz, Penn shows a connection between people and happiness immediately before McCandless meets Franz. This creates a dramatic irony that haunts the scenes with Franz, making McCandless seem more naïve in his audacity, lecturing him on "the joy of life" being in adventure and new experience, while at the same time making the old man's relational affection seem all the more tragic for not being entirely reciprocated by McCandless, who chose experience over relationship. The actual "HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED" moment in the film occurs right at the end with tears of sudden insight and a helpless knowledge of death's imminence.

Another way in which nature is presented to us through McCandless, in apparent contradiction to the callous wolves or the lifeless "screen," is nature as caring, maternal provider. Krakauer describes the time McCandless paddled down into Mexico on his own: "For [thirty-six days] he subsisted on nothing but five pounds of rice and what marine life he could pull from the sea…"[340] His extreme reliance upon not only his own strength and resourcefulness, but on the provision of nature, sets up a particular kind of relationship. Because McCandless was alone for those thirty-six days, there is an exclusivity to the time spent together, which creates a sense of intimacy. Towards the end of the book, one of the conclusions Krakauer draws is that, like Muir and Thoreau, McCandless discovered that "it

[339] These quotations appear on page 168 of Krakauer's book. He notes that McCandless finished reading this book on July 2nd and tried to walk back out of the wild on July 3rd. His attempt was thwarted by a high river.
[340] Ibid., 36.

is impossible to live off the land without developing both a subtle understanding of, and a strong emotional bond with, that land and all it holds."[341] The care he took to study the local flora, the effort in searching out edible plants, as well as the energy, skill, luck, and determination required to successfully hunt game in Alaska – all of this combined to establish a strong emotional bond with his provider. Food extracted from the wild was not merely a welcome snack, but a fundamental aspect of survival. It seems natural that we see affection in his relationship with nature as source of sustenance, and perhaps we project reciprocation onto an obviously neutral environment.

In the end, however, despite all its apparent 'kindness', nature became his opponent. The idea of nature as opponent, something to be dominated and tamed by masculine power, was perhaps more commonly held in America before the 1960s. Krakauer mentions an ideal example of this attitude in his account of Sir John Franklin – moderately famous in his time as the Man Who Ate His Shoes – who "regarded nature as an antagonist that would inevitably submit to force, good breeding, and Victorian discipline." This gross underestimation of nature caused him to lead 128 men to their deaths in the Arctic. [342]

Though perhaps not quite as brash and haughty, there is a degree to which McCandless is also guilty of hubris in his interactions with the wild. Krakauer quotes a letter from a writer and schoolteacher, Nick Jans, who describes McCandless in harsh terms:

> Such willful ignorance … amounts to disrespect for the land, and paradoxically demonstrates the same sort of arrogance that resulted in the Exxon Valdez spill –

[341] Ibid., 182.
[342] Ibid., 180.

> just another case of underprepared, overconfident men bumbling around out there and screwing up because they lacked the requisite humility.[343]

In his attempt to kill what he called "the false being within," possibly in pursuit of the normative ideology of a "masculine script," he was driven to acts of daring and danger. One example from the film is the illegal white water kayaking – without a helmet, licence, or guide, McCandless's smug disregard for safety and proper procedure is tantamount to disrespect for nature. And disrespect for nature eventually turned out to be tragic underestimation of an opponent. When he decides to return to society, having realised perhaps that some kind of community is vital to happiness, he is thwarted by the river. He writes in his journal: "HAVE LITERALLY BECOME TRAPPED IN THE WILD." The tragic irony is that he was imprisoned by the very place in which he sought freedom. And it is in this wild prison that his adventure ends, vanquished by an opponent he saw as provider – an opponent that never saw him at all.

Philosopher, Edmund Burke, writing on the subject of Society and Solitude observes "that an entire life of solitude contradicts the purposes of our being, since death itself is scarcely an idea of more terror."[344] However, another philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev, in his book called *Solitude and Society* contends that death and solitude are not merely comparable in terror, but are in fact deeply connected.

> Thus the problem of solitude would appear to be rooted in the most fundamental problem of philosophy – that of the Ego, with its contingent problems of the personality, of society, of communion, and of knowledge. Ultimately, the problem of

[343] Ibid., 73.
[344] Burke, *On the Sublime and Beautiful* , accessed 15 August 2014, www.bartleby.com.

> solitude involves the problem of death. To die is to experience absolute solitude, to sever all connection with the world.[345]

If death is the ultimate severance of social ties, then suicide is the ultimate rejection of society. Given the grunge culture parallel I drew earlier, it is interesting to note the suicide of Nirvana front man Kurt Cobain. He was an iconic figure representing nonconformity, and uncompromising commitment to truth and authenticity. The be-true-to-yourself quotation, "I'd rather be hated for who I am than loved for who I am not," is popularly attributed to Cobain, although it was originally written by Andre Gide.[346] In his suicide note, Cobain stated, "The worst crime I can think of would be to rip people off by faking it and pretending as if I'm having 100% fun." His disgust at this inauthenticity and the feeling that there was no hope of escape contributed to his decision to kill himself. He resisted "selling out" to the point of death.

As I mentioned before, it could be said that most significant thing about the life of Christopher McCandless is that it ended so soon and under unusual circumstances. Although there is no indication that he committed suicide, he certainly courted death willingly, and it would seem he could have done a great deal more to avoid it. The obvious example is that he could have started a smoky fire to signal for help, and he would surely have been rescued. There were also other ways he may have crossed the river besides the treacherous swim. And yet, he chose self-reliance over rescue.

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345 Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society* (1938), 104.

346 Gide's version is in the form: "It is better to be hated for what you are than loved for what you are not'. Gide, *Autumn Leaves* (2007), 10.

In the film, however, his solitary death is not entirely solitary. Moments before he zips up his sleeping bag for the last time, we see a dreamy montage of some of the people he knew and possibly loved accompanied by an emotive stringed score. We see his sister smiling, Rainey and Jan, Westerberg leaving prison, the Danish couple winning at a casino, Tracy slow-dancing at a prom, his mother preparing dinner, and his father out on a suburban street, emotional, repentant. They are not scenes we have previously viewed as an audience. They are not memories; they are visions – predominantly pleasant ones. It may be argued that these shots serve only to accentuate the loneliness of his death, but there is also a degree of comfort that they offer. It is reminiscent of a paragraph in *Walden*, wherein Thoreau describes the death of a traveller in the company of spectres:

> I have heard of a man lost in the woods and dying of famine and exhaustion at the foot of a tree, whose loneliness was relieved by the grotesque visions with which, owing to bodily weakness, his diseased imagination surrounded him, and which he believed to be real. So also, owing to bodily and mental health and strength, we may be continually cheered by a like but more normal and natural society, and come to know that we are never alone.[347]

On the brink of death, between screams of agony and eventual serenity, McCandless is confronted by a suburban vision of home, running into the arms of his parents. Though the visions are certainly not grotesque, and there is joy initially, the scene becomes more ambiguous as we see his expression change, as if suddenly struck by the impossible nature of the dream, and the inevitability of his death. Through the montage and the vision, the audience is reminded of whom he is leaving behind – an impression that both adds to the tragedy and mitigates the otherwise profound loneliness of his death.

[347] Thoreau, *Walden* (1937), 123-24.

Finally, there is a sense in which, by eschewing society – its comfort and potential rescue – McCandless handed his fate over to nature: "a force not bound to be kind to man."[348] This idea is also intimated by what was on the reverse side of the blank page on which he chose to write what Krakauer calls "a brief adios."[349]

> At some point during [his last] week, he tore the final page from Louis L'Amour's memoir, *Education of a Wandering Man*. On one side of the page were some lines L'Amour had quoted from Robinson Jeffers's poem, "Wise Men in Their Bad Hours":
>
> *Death's a fierce meadowlark: but to die having made*
> *Something more equal to the centuries*
> *Than muscle and bone, is mostly to shed weakness.*
> *The mountains are dead stone, the people*
> *Admire or hate their stature, their insolent quietness,*
> *The mountains are not softened or troubled*
> *And a few dead men's thoughts have the same temper.*[350]

The final shot of the film seems to reinforce the notion of man integrated into nature through his death. It is a visual echo of the last lines of Krakauer's book, which describe him and Chris's parents departing from the bus via helicopter. A crane shot moves us from a close-up of McCandless's face to a long shot of him in the bus, and then – through a smooth composite transition – to a helicopter shot which takes us up to an extreme long shot of the bus, which gradually shrinks until it is almost entirely swallowed by the vast expanse of green nature around it.

As a film based on a fairly well-known true story, the majority of viewers would be familiar with the ending. With this in mind, the film's two-and-a-half hour running time is haunted

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348 Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (1909), 92.
349 "I HAVE HAD A HAPPY LIFE AND THANK THE LORD. GOODBYE AND MAY GOD BLESS ALL!" Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (2007), 198.
350 Ibid.

by a gradual awareness of pending death. The inevitability of that fate encroaches on the spacious vistas that McCandless explores. His setbacks and minor victories are increasingly darkened around the edges until they are eventually swallowed up by the shadow of that ultimate solitude, the final port of every man – whether he seeks it, or not.

Inside the Outsider:
The Minds of Travis Bickle

Fade In

"Loneliness has followed me my whole life…"[351]

As I implied in my discussion of scenes depicting Christopher McCandless in dissonance with the urban environment, the detachment one might feel *within* society can be as profound as any isolation experienced outside of it. Nikolai Berdyaev explains in *Solitude and Society*:

> In a certain sense, solitude is a social phenomenon, for it supposes an awareness of the Other Self. The most extreme and distressing form of solitude is that experienced in society, in the objective world.[352]

What I would like to emphasise here is that this kind of solitude is "distressing." Unlike the solitude of Thoreau and McCandless which led them to a transcendental experience of nature, the solitude of the urban alienated male is a source of anxiety, which – as I will show with examples from history and fiction – can have violent, destructive consequences.

Albert Camus outlines the philosophical framework of alienation, man's response to "the Absurd", in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He also explores this philosophy in fiction through *L'Étranger* – with his reluctant protagonist, Meursault, as the quintessential disaffected urban

[351] All subtitle quotations in this chapter, unless otherwise stated, are taken from the film *Taxi Driver*.
[352] Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society* (1938), 94.

male who happens to murder a stranger on a beach one hot day. In my examination of the lonely man, the man isolated and alienated within society, I have drawn on Camus and his philosophy of the Absurd – particularly as expressed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which I will refer to occasionally throughout this chapter as I analyse the masculinity and loneliness of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976). I will also discuss the fictional characters and real-life persons who contributed to his creation, as well as John Hinckley: the man alleged to have been heavily influenced by the film in the time leading up to his attempted assassination of then president, Ronald Reagan, in 1981. While the analysis of Travis Bickle will be my primary focus, I will refer to Hinckley, *L'Etranger*'s Meursault, and even the filmmakers involved, as other cultural touchstones of alienated, anomic masculinity. I will examine Bickle's conformity and non-conformity to hegemonic American masculinity with a particular emphasis on sexuality and violence as channels of masculine expression, where a kind of over-compensation occurs, possibly due to deficiency in the other tenets of mainstream masculine behaviour. This over-compensation, which Bickle expresses through extreme violence, becomes a mechanism, whether consciously or unconsciously employed, by which he thrusts himself into the society that has either ignored or rejected him. To further the analysis of this complex screen persona, I will also discuss issues of conflicted identity, the relation of the individual character to society and the audience, as well as the notion of 'the outsider as observer'.

Thoreau and his ilk choose to retreat from society, abandoning human companionship for a sojourn in the woods, but return at their convenience, whereas the urban alienated male is rendered lonely against his will. He does not abandon society; society simply has no place for him. The solitary man recognises the value of solitude and the beauty of nature, but these

things do not attract the alienated man. Society is strange to the stranger, and there is something about that otherness that fascinates him. He is drawn like some Kafkaesque insect to the lights of the city. Perhaps it is not important to determine whether society rejects him first, causing his misanthropy, or the reverse. But what I will highlight is the fact that social rejection and misanthropy perpetuate each other, leaving the alienated man in a tragic cycle, orbiting in slow circles around the glowing society he at once hates and longs to be accepted by. Finally, however, he may break the cycle of separation through violence to himself or others – an act which either repels him into darkness, or sends him crashing into the flame. And suddenly the insect, the invisible man, is made visible to the society that ignored him. He has set himself on fire.

As I mentioned earlier, Albert Camus's notion of the Absurd is also an essential concept in this chapter. It is a philosophical worldview, which Camus defines and develops particularly in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Simon du Plock in his essay 'Albert Camus – Existentialist or Absurdist?' attempts to delineate this view of the human condition as follows:

> [The Absurd is] the world's stubborn refusal to satisfy our notions of reason and order, alongside and despite our constant desire for it to do so. The Absurd is to be found in the gulf between the world's indifference and our human expectations of it.[353]

However, the concept is more interesting, and certainly more relevant to this chapter, in terms of how man *experiences* it, which essentially occurs on three levels:

[353] Du Plock, 'Albert Camus – Existentialist or Absurdist?' in *Existential Analysis: Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis*, Vol. 16 Issue 1 (January 2005), 15.

> (i) sudden sense of being *un etranger* – an outsider, foreigner, exile – in a universe without enlightenment. Our existence is characterised by a sense of the feeling of being an actor on a stage…
> (ii) in everyday routine, ritual, habit a sudden awareness of pointless repetition …
> (iii) the sense of complete meaninglessness, as in watching a man mouthing words on a telephone behind glass … which leads to the sense of absence of any foundation, reason for existence.[354]

I will explore this experience of alienation primarily with direct reference to the depiction of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, as well as relevant commentary and insight from the filmmakers regarding the creation and interpretation of the character. However, aside from John Hinckley and texts already mentioned in support of my discussions around masculinity and solitude, I also make other references in my analysis. Robert Kolker's *A Cinema of Loneliness* and Thomas Elsaesser's essay on 'The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the 1970s' help to contextualise Bickle in the cinema of his time. Gretchen Swartz offers great insight on the masculinity of Robert De Niro's onscreen persona, and my points on violence, and the influence of the war in Vietnam on American masculinity, are made with reference to essays by Jason Katzman and Susan Jeffords.

Bickle's anomic masculinity provides an interesting counterpoint to other Hollywood depictions of hegemonic American masculinity – especially because there seem to be as many contrasts as there are consistencies. Though his masculinity is alienated from the social tenets of the mainstream, he nevertheless conforms in other ways that are perhaps more extreme and conflicted.

[354] Ibid., 16-7.

Illusions are Realities

"The dream's real. The paranoia is real." — Martin Scorsese

At this point, and before I begin to apply notions of alienation and masculinity directly to Travis Bickle, I would like to discuss the genesis of this character – how he evolved from a combination of fact and fiction to become a screen persona that has lived on in popular memory. On the front cover of his *Taxi Driver* screenplay, Schrader quotes from 'God's Lonely Man', the Thomas Wolfe essay I refer to in the preface to this thesis:

> The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence.[355]

These few lines, lifted from the essay, frame the script, the blueprint, for a film and a character that now occupy a place not only in cinema history, but in our public consciousness. The protagonist, Travis Bickle, portrayed in all his hideous charm by Robert De Niro, has come to stand for something beyond himself. He is not merely a character in film; he is a cultural marker, a symbol that has come to represent the social condition of a particular type of man.

Schrader states in the DVD interview that the character is inspired largely by his own experience – when he became suddenly homeless, unemployed, and estranged from both his wife and the woman for whom he left her, driving him to consume great quantities of

[355] Schrader's quotation is actually an abridged form of the lines that appear in the essay: "The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, peculiar to myself and to a few other solitary men, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence." Wolfe, 'God's Lonely Man' (1965), 193.

alcohol and pornography. And yet, this character is by no means original. Bickle has precedents – both in history and in literature.

In the novel *L'Etranger (The Outsider)* we are introduced to Meursault, without whom we might not have characters like Bickle, even if there would still be men like Hinckley. Though Bickle may have been born out of Schrader's personal despair, he was not conceived independently; Schrader does not pretend that Bickle is something new; instead, he suggests that the character is a "type" drawn, in this case, from "existential" novels. "So before writing the script I reread *L'Etranger* and *La Nausée*… just to sort of get my mind… in the mind-set of those kinds of characters."[356] In fact, one might even argue that Schrader would not have been so acutely aware of his own condition, had he not been exposed to these fictional predecessors.

Meursault is the fictional character who epitomises Camus's Absurdist philosophy. In a way, the novel exists as a fictional demonstration of his philosophical treatise, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which addresses the problem of suicide and whether it is the only rational response to an irrational universe. His view that existentialism is "philosophical suicide"[357] is a view of the world that resists this extreme form of surrender, because the Absurd life "is a matter of

[356] Paul Schrader made this comment in an interview filmed for the DVD extra features of the collector's edition. All references to actions/dialogue in the motion picture *Taxi Driver* (1976) [directed by Martin Scorsese; written by Paul Schrader], as well as related commentaries, interviews, and documentaries are from the 2-disc DVD collector's edition, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007. All quotations from Paul Schrader, Martin Scorsese, and Robert Kolker contained in this thesis, unless otherwise stated, refer to the commentaries and interviews in this DVD edition.
[357] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1981), 42. In the film, Bickle attempts suicide only to discover that the pistol chamber is empty.

persisting"[358] and there is "honour in enduring the world's Absurdity."[359] The Absurd man is, however, extremely isolated in this incomprehensible universe, and ironically it is this loneliness that binds him to Travis Bickle and, in a sense, to that segment of society, that immense crowd of actual persons, these characters have come to represent.

John Warnock Hinckley Jr. was a lonely man, rejected by society.[360] In high school, he was reclusive, "rarely brought friends home and would spend hours alone in his room, strumming his guitar." A high school classmate described him as "a non-guy." In April 1976, he dropped out of college and moved to Hollywood "to pursue his dreams of becoming a songwriter." That summer he saw *Taxi Driver* fifteen times. He "became obsessed" with the film, and would go on to read and reread the book that, to some extent, formed part of the inspiration for *Taxi Driver*: extracts from Arthur Bremer's journals, published as *An Assassin's Diary*. He also bought the soundtrack and listened to it "for hours on end, … developed an intense obsession with an actress in the film, Jodie Foster," and in 1981, in an action clearly motivated by a desire to achieve notoriety and thereby Foster's affection, he attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan. Hinckley's abnormally strong identification with Travis Bickle played a key role in his trial. The film was even screened in court as a kind of closing statement by the defence, clearly indicating their confidence that this would demonstrate the obvious influence the film had on the mentally unstable defendant. John Hinckley was found not guilty by reason of insanity.

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358 Ibid., 46.
359 Ibid., 77.
360 This brief biography of sorts for John Hinckley is largely based on information provided by the 'Famous Trials' database written by Douglas Linder for the University of Missouri–Kansas City law faculty. 'The John Hinckley Trial by Douglas Linder,' 2002, University of Missouri-Kansas City, accessed 15 August 2014, law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hinckley/hinckleytrial.html.

He did not fit the paradigm of hegemonic American masculinity. In the absence of friends, he had no homosocial approval. He failed to complete his college education. Cut off from his parents' wealth, and his father's respect, he was poor, unemployed, and the only romantic relationship he had was imaginary – "a make-believe girlfriend named Lynn Collins modeled on [Betsy from *Taxi Driver*]," whom he would write about in letters to his parents in much the same way as Bickle writes to his parents in the film. In addition to this fictional character, Hinckley was also influenced by Lee Harvey Oswald and Arthur Bremer, who attempted to assassinate George Wallace.[361]

Hinckley also wanted recognition from society, if only for his purported ultimate goal of winning the affection of Jodie Foster. In his final letter to Foster, written just two hours before the assassination attempt, he admits that the reason for his action was to impress her[362] and "with this historical deed, to gain your respect and love." After the shooting, the incarcerated Hinckley wrote another letter in which he stated: "At one time Miss Foster was a star and I was the insignificant fan. Now everything is changed. I am Napoleon and she is Josephine." Again, violence was used as a means to be seen, to be noticed, respected,

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[361] In *An Assassin's Diary*, Bremer states his intention to assassinate either Richard Nixon or George Wallace, but he also makes a declaration of his purpose: "to do SOMETHING BOLD AND DRAMATIC, FORCEFUL & DYNAMIC, A STATEMENT of my manhood for the world to see." Okonowicz, *True Crime: Maryland: The State's Most Notorious Criminal Cases* (2009), 34.
He establishes a link between violent action and his sense of masculinity. Like Hinckley, at school, Bremer was either bullied or ignored. He was socially awkward and grew up to be a quiet man, and a social outcast. He wanted to gain notoriety. The assassination was an attempt to gain the attention of the society which had rejected him.

[362] "I will admit to you that the reason I'm going ahead with this attempt now is because I just cannot wait any longer to impress you."

accepted, and even loved. It is an idea reinforced by *Taxi Driver*, in which Travis Bickle's murderous rampage is rewarded. He becomes a hero.

This description of Bremer's personality, and actions leading up to the attempted assassination, is intended to act both as real-life counterpoint to Bickle, as well as an, admittedly extreme, example of the potential effect of a man identifying with a fictional character. Perhaps from this we may infer that masculinity, as demonstrated on screen, has a subtler, but no less real, influence on the identity formation of male viewers. For example, Hinckley's obsession with the film, and the historical figures who inspired him, form an interesting parallel with McCandless's engagement with the fiction of Tolstoy, Pasternak, and London, as well as Thoreau's life and work. Though one man was driven to attempted murder, and the other merely to reckless adventure, there seems to be a common desire to make fiction a reality, to live it out, and to recreate the larger-than-life experience of historical figures. Paul Schrader explains the influence of his fictional creation on real people by admitting that "these kinds of characters do become touchstones for people who are mentally unstable." He mentions Holden Caulfield, Travis Bickle, and Raskolnikov, but then he says in response to critics and censors, "If you ban *Crime and Punishment*, you will still have Raskolnikov; you just won't have *Crime and Punishment*." The implication, of course, is that there will be murderers, regardless of whether we have great fiction that seeks to explore and dramatise them.

Moreover, Travis Bickle is not fabricated purely from Schrader's imagination. His elements existed before him. He is an amalgamation – taken from Schrader's own experience, Arthur Bremer's diary, and fiction such as Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Sartre's *Nausea*, and

L'Etranger. Even De Niro's portrayal of Johnny Boy in Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) foreshadows Bickle to some extent as a psychologically unstable character driving the film towards a violent end. It is important to note here the profound mutual influence that occurs between fictional characters and real persons, as is clearly exemplified by the men and fictional protagonists mentioned above, and as I explain in my discussion of Hinckley. Though it might be easy to downplay the effect of cinema on the lives of real people, I contend that film and literature can be central to the creation of self-concepts – particularly for American men and their idea of masculinity. Cinema creates a powerful vision of male identity and, in some cases, an ideal fantasy of a masculinity that demands imitation.

A sort of cinematic contemporary for Bickle is Kit Carruthers – the garbage collector, James Dean look-alike, and occasional murderer in Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973). Kit's story takes place in 1959, but he is very much a New Hollywood conflicted protagonist – his inner conflict highlighted by the contrast between his lack of motivation and the inherent forward momentum of the road movie genre. Thomas Elsaesser describes this phenomenon:

> The contradiction – or tension – lies in the combination of the unmotivated hero and the motif of the journey, that is, the recourse on the one hand to a motivation, ready-made, highly conventionalised and brought to the film from outside, and on the other, the lack of corresponding motivation on the inside, on the part of the protagonist's inner drive or palpable conflict.[363]

Kit and Holly drive the roads of America without much sense of direction, committing murders seemingly at random. Bickle manages to stumble upon a purpose of sorts when he decides to assassinate the senator, but even then he changes his mind and, instead, focuses his efforts on rescuing Iris. Up until this point, however, he has been drifting from scene to

[363] Elsaesser, 'The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the 1970s' in *The Last Great American Picture Show – New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, et al. (2004), 280.

scene, desperate for a clear objective – a thought he expresses in the voice-over line: "All my life needed was a sense of some place to go." De Niro reads the line in a vacant, despondent tone, and it ironically plays over the image of him lying on a bed, obviously with no intention of going anywhere. A similar conflict between Bickle's intentions (communicated through voice-over) and his actions (represented visually) comes at the end of his far more urgent, threatening, even exultant, voice-over – directly following the "You talking to me?" scene. As we hear his written 'speech' climax with, "Here is someone who STOOD UP!" we immediately see him lying down on his cot again, then turning over, and curling up into an almost foetal position. This impression of Bickle's desperate attempt to go somewhere, to *do* something, to rise up against the Absurd worldview's pervasive tide of meaninglessness is suggested metaphorically throughout the film by Bickle's job as a cab driver. Although *Taxi Driver* is by no means a road movie in the conventional sense, a high proportion of its scenes take place in a car. And if Kit and Holly's journey seems aimless, Bickle's must be the ultimate pointless road trip. He drives all day, every day, and never arrives at any particular destination – he always ends up where he began: back at the Taxi Garage.

It would seem that film and fiction, historical accounts and our present reality, all exist concurrently – in a perpetual flux of interdependence and mutual influence – on a kind of "reality-fiction continuum". Though I do not want to digress into a dialectical discussion about the nature of reality, it is important to make some observations about the relationship between real and fictional representations of masculinity and solitude at this point. In order to understand how Travis Bickle is situated in relation to Christopher McCandless, as well as his connection to the various men of history and fiction who prefigured, inspired, or were

subsequently influenced by him, it is helpful to establish a kind of language with which to discuss the spectrum of reality that exists between the actual and the cinematic.

In the DVD interview Scorsese explains in his hyperkinetic diction how the concepts of reality, fantasy and dream all bleed into each other – particularly in *Taxi Driver* with regard to Bickle's mental state:

> The hallucinatory idea is definitely a point of view when a person crosses the line between fantasy and reality... or reality into fantasy. The fantasy is as real as the reality. It's real. The dream's real. The paranoia is real.

The passage from fantasy to reality is not a one-way corridor, for reality, too, may appear as a fantasy. Thomas Wolfe echoes this sentiment in 'God's Lonely Man': "And the cancerous plant of memory is feeding on [the entrails of the lonely man] ... until all life seems as strange and insubstantial as a dream."[364] While Scorsese is referring to a dream-reality relationship within the diegetic realm, Federico Fellini, in a 1984 interview with *Rolling Stone*, expands this to include a relationship between our real dreams and the nature of cinema.

> Talking about dreams is like talking about movies, since the cinema uses the language of dreams; years can pass in a second and you can hop from one place to another. It's a language made of image. And in the real cinema, every object and every light means something, as in a dream.[365]

The impact of our dreams and fantasies on our real psychological selves is suggested by Alfred Appel in his lucid notes to *Lolita* in which he states that "illusions *are* realities in their

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364 Wolfe, 'God's Lonely Man' (1965), 196.
365 Cott, 'Fellini's Language of Dreams: The Italian filmmaker talks about his magical medium' in *Rolling Stone*, no. 421 (1984), accessed 15 August 2014, www.maryellenmark.com.

ability to destroy us."[366] This clearly seems to be the case for Bickle and Hinckley, whose delusional mental conditions caused them to harm both themselves and others, as they played out their fantasies.

And, of course, all the world is a stage – not only for the man responding to the Absurd, but for the performance of hegemonic American masculinity: a fantasy acted out for an audience of male peers. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus describes how he might see an actor perform a hundred times, and though he does not know the actor personally, he could say he knows something of him if he "add[s] up the heroes he has personified." Camus concludes that "a man defines himself by his make-believe as well as by his sincere impulses,"[367] and, more to the point, "The actor has taught us this: there is no frontier between being and appearing."[368] This applies to all men who play out their masculine ideals on a consistent basis, but it also applies to actors such as Robert De Niro in a much more literal sense. In her article "'You Talkin' to Me?': De Niro's Interrogative Fidelity and Subversion of Masculine Norms', Gretchen Schwartz argues that De Niro has perpetuated his onscreen persona to the point of it being assimilated into his identity:

> De Niro's persona has never truly broken free of the characterization of Travis … he remains a subject to his viewers' expectations. De Niro has, in actuality, become the job, reminding his viewers that identity is part performance, perhaps especially in America. In the extreme forms of method acting and the characterizations that De Niro has maintained in his persona, the performance has also become an identity.[369]

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366 Appel, notes to *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov (1971), 322 (author's emphasis).
367 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1981), 18.
368 Ibid., 106.
369 Schwartz, "'You Talkin' to Me?": De Niro's Interrogative Fidelity and Subversion of Masculine Norms' in *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 41, No. 3 (2008), 449.
Schwartz also goes on to point out that De Niro's more recent performances maintain a sense of humour about his masculine, often violent, onscreen persona. He has taken on various comedic roles in films such as *Analyze This* (1999), *Meet the Parents* (2000), and their various sequels – possibly as an

It is not simply a case of the star system creating a public persona, but also the performance of similar roles, possibly intensified by the nature of method acting, that allows the actor, and the audience, to believe the myth of the onscreen persona.[370] And it is difficult to imagine a more extreme form of method acting than the average American man performing his idea of acceptable masculinity on a daily basis.

attempt to diffuse the limitations of being typecast. However, since the comedy and parody of these films is based on De Niro playing against type, they ultimately confirm the sustained power of that type in the popular opinion of the audience.

[370] cf. Joan Mellen's comments on Charles Bronson and Steve McQueen as quoted in the 'Hegemonic American Masculinity' chapter.

Man in a Shell

"Here is a man who would not take it anymore. A man who stood up …"

Bickle and Hinckley exhibit a masculinity that is consistent with the other outsiders, Thoreau and McCandless, in that theirs is a masculinity far removed from the hegemonic American. And, like the other two, they seem to compensate for the deficiencies through an exaggeration of the areas in which they do conform. However, since Bickle and Hinckley are anomic outsiders, rejected by society, they display a somewhat different set of amplified masculine traits from those of the men who deliberately separated themselves from social contexts and values.

In this next section, I will describe the elements of Bickle's deficit in hegemonic masculinity – with reference to Hinckley and a particular emphasis on their lack of sexual agency – followed by a more detailed account of Bickle's compensatory amplification of those aspects in which he does conform to the hegemonic ideal. The latter cluster of behaviours includes Bickle's lack of intimate friendships, his silence, stoicism, affinity for danger, and heroism. Though it is obvious, it must be noted that as lonely individuals, alienated from society, Bickle and Hinckley both experience an absence of homosocial validation, sexual conquest and the concomitant siring of children. They fail to achieve any financial success – Bickle as a cab driver and Hinckley, unemployed – both severely lacking in personal agency.[371] They do not possess power over other people – that form of control which Michael Kaufman

[371] And in Bickle's case, this situation is exacerbated by his Posttraumatic stress disorder, or, more specifically, Post Vietnam Syndrome (PVS). I will explain the significance of the war, and violence in general, later in this chapter – with reference to articles by Jason Katzman and Susan Jeffords, and how this history of violence impacts Bickle's masculinity on screen.

argues is so essential to "the dominant forms of contemporary masculinity."[372] One of the ways Schrader chooses to highlight this is through Bickle's racism. He states in the DVD commentary that Bickle's implicit, and sometimes overt, racism is an unconscious reaction to his marginalisation: "people who feel they are near the bottom of the ladder are always looking for people who are lower on the ladder."

However, it is perhaps their failure to consummate romantic objectives that becomes the most potent fuel to action for both men, since, as Berdyaev explains, sex is not simply a solution to loneliness, but one of its primary causes:

> Sex is one of the chief causes of human solitude. Man is a sexual being, that is, half a being, divided and incomplete, aspiring to be complete. Sex brings about a profound division of the Ego, which is by nature bi-sexual, both male and female, androgynous. Thus man's endeavour to overcome solitude through communion is primarily an endeavour to overcome the isolation caused by sex, to achieve reunion in sexual integrity. Its very existence implies separation, want, longing, and the desire to identify oneself with another. But the physical union of the sexes, which puts an end to sexual desire, is not in itself sufficient to banish solitude. Indeed, it may only intensify man's sense of solitude.[373]

While Thoreau and McCandless were celibate by choice (probably throughout their lives) and apparently content, Bickle and Hinckley seem to experience deep dissatisfaction with their inability to win the objects of their desire – Betsy and Jodie Foster respectively. There is a strange triangulation of aspiration at work here: blue collar Bickle idolises the beautiful upper class Betsy (played by Hollywood golden girl, Cybill Shepherd), while Hinckley, the son of a multimillionaire oil executive,[374] becomes obsessed with Jodie Foster, who plays a "fallen innocent", the child prostitute. There is a sense in which Bickle is attempting to

372 Kaufman, 'Men, Feminism, and Men's Contradictory Experiences of Power' (1994), 142-163.
373 Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society* (1938), 118-9.
374 Zastrow, *Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare: Empowering People* (2010), 292.

transcend his social class, while Hinckley is pursuing a more complex set of impulses. These could include his alleged desire for fame,[375] as a way of compensating for his failure to achieve the conventional success of his wealthy father and brother, or perhaps a kind of rebellion expressed as self-sabotage – pursuing an impossible relationship and receiving numerous rebuttals from the "fallen innocent". It is difficult to imagine a clearer example of idealised objectification of a woman than Hinckley's obsession with an actress he never met – an obsession expressed in love letters, poems, phone calls, and eventually an attempted murder in order to impress her. But this would be difficult to discuss without a fair amount of conjecture, and so I will focus my analysis on Bickle's sexuality, which, as a created entity, is more clearly defined.

The introduction of Bickle's idealised love is particularly interesting. It takes place a few seconds after the porno theatre scene, where his sexual desire is visually expressed onscreen primarily through his gaze and the money he pays for a ticket. Bickle is an observer, and his sexuality reflects that. Before we even see Betsy, she is being framed by his voice-over and his gaze. The entire scene is in slow motion, narrated by Bickle, and accentuated by the more romantic saxophone leitmotif:

> I first saw her at Palantine campaign headquarters at 63rd and Broadway. She was wearing a white dress. [At his point we see Scorsese, essentially the film's chief gaze-director, as an extra on a crowded street; his head turns to watch her walk by.] She appeared like an angel [Betsy finally emerges from the crowd] out of this filthy mass. She is alone. They cannot touch her.

We see a pencil writing the last line. It is revealed that the voice-over is actually a journal entry – a further framing device, securing his idea of her in words. As Robert Kolker points

[375] Ibid.

out in his DVD commentary, Bickle "traps" the fantasy world of Betsy with his words. He describes her in romantic clichés of purity – wearing white, magically appearing like an angel – and it ends with her singled out from the crowd, alone, just like him. He seems to project loneliness onto her,[376] as if the narcissist is merely seeing his own reflection in the object of his desire. He watches without seeing. He is disconnected from reality and society along with it. Kolker associates this with the pornography: "His visiting of porn movies is, I think, another part of this disconnect. There is no notion that Travis Bickle has any kind of sexual life. It's, again, all within his mind." I will discuss the nature of the outsider as observer in greater depth towards the end of this chapter, but, for now, let it suffice to note that the object of the gaze is dehumanised, fetishised, removed from reality, and distanced from the observer. The vicarious participation of the voyeur is devoid of reciprocal intimacy as he views images of other people engaging in sexual activity – usually at his own financial expense. Sexuality is reduced to consumerism, sensuality to product, making pornography "both an expression of men's public power [patriarchy] and an expression of their lack of personal power."[377] This lack of agency is emphasised in the film with a brief scene between the porno theatre and the Betsy-as-angel scene. We simply see Bickle alone in his apartment, lying motionless on his bed, and we hear his voice-over thoughts: "I don't believe that one should devote his life to morbid self-attention. I believe that someone should become a person like other people."

The contradiction of criticising self-attention through a journal entry seems to echo a scene from *Badlands* where Kit uses the rich man's Dictaphone to record his thoughts. After

376 When Bickle first introduces himself to her and asks her on a date, he tells her that he thinks she is "a lonely person" – an opinion he admits he formed by watching her from his cab.
377 Brod, 'Pornography and the Alienation of Male Sexuality' (1996), 246.

forcibly entering another man's home, and having killed several people earlier, he offers advice to young people: "Listen to your parents and teachers … Try to understand the viewpoint of others." Both characters are deeply conflicted and seemingly unaware of their hypocrisy. In Bickle's case, the contrast between his intention to be involved in society, to "become a person like other people," and the image of him completely isolated, serves to underline the sense of inaction, the lack of participation in the real world, which we see in the other two scenes.

Another way in which Bickle objectifies and commodifies Betsy is in the more typically masculine sense of using her as currency to display his masculine prowess to other men – an attempt to gain homosocial respect and dominance.[378] He does not merely seek to win Betsy, but to win her away from her colleague, Tom (played by Albert Brooks), who has a much more natural rapport with Betsy – engaging her intellectually and making her laugh. After Betsy points out that a taxi driver has been staring at them, Tom quips that he will "play the male in this relationship," and goes over to ask him to move his cab. Bickle panics and drives away quickly, essentially retreating from their first encounter. But the next time they meet, Bickle walks in confidently, politely but assertively dismisses Tom, and then focuses on persuading Betsy to go out with him, successfully drawing her away from Tom. On the actual date, however, the rivalry with Tom remains a focus. In the three-minute scene in a diner, he tries and fails to make small talk. Bickle almost immediately begins to deride Tom, contrasting him negatively with himself. It is the subject he speaks most enthusiastically about in the entire conversation. When it subsides, he asks her where she is from – an attempt at a polite conversation – but then returns to the previous topic with another brief

[378] cf. Brod and Kimmel in the 'Hegemonic American Masculinity' chapter.

rant about Tom's inadequacies. Betsy is therefore further objectified as a prize to be competed for. These two forms of female commodification collide when he takes Betsy to see a pornographic film. Horrified, she leaves the theatre, and refuses to see him again, which prompts Bickle to storm into the campaign office where he has a final encounter with his rival. Bickle is no longer suave and confident, but aggressive, volatile, and seemingly dangerous. Tom, however, stands his ground and manages to make Bickle leave without resorting to violence. Tom asserts his dominance by taking control of the situation without losing his temper. Though Bickle displays more typically masculine behaviour, he is also disempowered, rejected, and expelled from the social context. Tom succeeds in driving Bickle out of the building, establishing his power, even if he must call a police officer – an appeal to public authority, which may be read as an act of weakness.

Bickle alienates himself through the counterfeit intimacy of pornography as well as the artificial connection he has with an idealised woman. Both the porno theatre and his objectification of Betsy are symptoms of his self-perpetuating loneliness. By making her an object, by dehumanising her, he is simply eliminating another opportunity for human contact. While I have discussed Bickle's failure in sexual conquest in terms of deviance from hegemonic masculinity, there is also a degree to which his behaviour also upholds notions of stereotypical masculinity, that is, the objectification of women and a focus on competition with other males.

There are many other ways in which Bickle and, to a lesser extent his imitator, Hinckley, conform to hegemonic American masculinity. In fact, I will suggest that in most cases Bickle "over-performs" in these areas – a compensatory effect due to failure in the overarching

performance arena of homosocial approval. Perhaps the most immediately obvious, particularly in the visual medium of cinema, is Bickle's physical appearance. Though the outsider has little influence over other people, he at least has power over his own body, which becomes a vital canvas for the expression and projection of his masculinity. He wears cowboy boots and a military jacket. His weapons are attached to his body – a knife taped to his boot and guns in holsters almost intimately against his skin, tucked under his arms. Hinckley mimicked a lot of Bickle's behaviour, including a "preference for army fatigue jackets and boots." He also "developed a fascination with guns." The guns are fetishised in the way Bickle handles them alone in his room, even creating a little release mechanism – a gun slide hidden up his sleeve. The effect of the guns as compensation for his lack of sexual agency is underscored by the film's editing. Juxtaposed between scenes of Bickle at a shooting range and playing with his guns in his apartment, is a brief scene at the porno theatre: we hear the audio of the film – a woman's voice praising the size of a penis: "Look at the size of that." Bickle aims his finger like a gun at the screen. This scene is foreshadowed only two minutes earlier by the scene with Easy Andy, the gun salesman, who says to Bickle: "Look at that... Look at that – that's a beauty," followed by the camera slowly 'admiring' the length of the .44 magnum barrel, fetishising the weapon.

In addition to enhancing his masculine appearance through guns and clothing, he also transforms his body through a strict exercise regimen and eventually shaving his hair into a mohawk.[379] Bernard Herrmann's ominous score plays over shots of Bickle lifting weights, doing push-ups and pull-ups. The montage is narrated by another reading from his journal:

[379] This onscreen commitment to physical metamorphosis foreshadows De Niro's real life transformations in preparation for various film roles – a connection which further blurs the line

> June 29th. I gotta get in shape now. Too much sitting has ruined my body. Too much abuse has gone on for too long. From now on, I'm gonna do 50 pushups each morning. Fifty pull-ups. There will be no more pills. There will be no more bad food, no more destroyers of my body. From now on, it'll be total organization. Every muscle must be tight.

When Bickle does push-ups we see a large scar on his back. A history of violence is inscribed on his body like a testament to his manliness, and war veteran credentials. Another point in this montage is that in contrast with his voice declaring that there will be no more destroyers of his body, we see him holding his fist over a gas stove flame, his arm muscles lean and flexed. This strongly emphasises the importance of male toughness: the body must be robust; "every muscle must be tight." And he must also be able to stoically endure pain – not only the healthy pain required for exercise, but also the harmful pain of burning skin. It is clear to the audience that Bickle is becoming increasingly mentally unstable. But this image also takes manly endurance to an extreme. It is interesting to note "De Niro has said that he imagined Travis as a crab."[380] Not only does the image invoke something solitary, easily agitated and possessing the ability to be aggressive when provoked, but also the idea of a carapace protecting soft, sensitive flesh. Bickle is a man in a shell, enduring the pain of being alone.

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between the characters he portrays and his professional persona. Most notable among these physical changes were both for Scorsese films: De Niro gained 27 kilograms, and became clinically obese, for the final scenes of *Raging Bull* (1980), and he dropped to only 4 percent body fat for his role in *Cape Fear* (1991). Rosen, 'Hollywood Takes It Off' in *People Magazine*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (January 13, 1992).

380 Schwartz, "'You Talkin' to Me?": De Niro's Interrogative Fidelity and Subversion of Masculine Norms' (2008), 447. Schwartz comments on this, stating: "In a way, this is one ideal description for the masculine persona that has grown from this role."

Besides burning himself on an open flame, Bickle also inflicts other harm on himself in the form of drugs and a terrible diet of sugary food and peach brandy.[381] This behaviour forms part of a high-risk lifestyle, which is integral to the "trial period" of a young man proving his masculinity. As mentioned previously, Michael Kimmel has stated that "young men take huge chances to prove their manhood, exposing themselves to health risks, workplace hazards, and stress-related illnesses. … Safety is emasculating!"[382] As a twenty-six-year-old taxi driver, Bickle takes enormous risks including illegal activity, which begins with drugs and driving his cab "off the meter", and eventually climaxes in multiple homicide and attempted suicide. In a study called 'Deviance and Marginal Occupations: The Case of Taxi Drivers', Matthew Sheahan and Philip Smith discuss interviews with younger male taxi drivers. They found a strong correlation between dangerous or deviant behaviour and masculine identity.

> Listening to the [interview] tapes it became clear that the drivers spoke of their activities with bravado and as evidence of control and prowess. Driving fast, taking drugs, and ripping people off should be understood, in part, as a manifestation of a particular form of working class, youthful, masculine identity as this is expressed in the workplace.[383]

The fact that the cab drivers interviewed were young men is consistent with a study by Charles Vidich in 1976 called 'The New York Cab Driver and His Fare' in which he observes "that older drivers and female drivers … were less likely to engage in illegal activity."[384] Sheahan and Smith also state that the "occupational culture" of taxi drivers, who "see themselves as embattled and isolated individuals struggling with poor pay and

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381 Hinckley also apparently chose to drink peach brandy because of this.
382 Kimmel, *Guyland* (2008), 51.
383 Sheahan and Smith, 'Deviance and Marginal Occupations: The Case of Taxi Drivers' in *Deviant Behavior*; Vol 24, Issue 221 (2003), 463.
384 Ibid.

conditions", is central to their deviance.[385] Travis Bickle, as the disempowered man on the margin, desperate to assert himself, clearly fits the description.[386]

Within this marginalised male-dominated cab driver culture, there is some sense of community, and we see it in *Taxi Driver*. The men know each other. They meet up in a diner to swap jokes and stories. However, Bickle's engagement with them on a relational level is superficial at best, and so fits the American male stereotype of "having buddies rather than intimate friends."[387] In fact, Bickle, as the lonely alienated man, barely even has buddies. When the other drivers attempt to connect with him, he is too distracted to respond directly to their questions. Instead he stares at a pimp sitting at a nearby table, or the effervescent tablet dissolving in his glass of water. He seems isolated even when in the company of others. And the barrier is often silence.

On the one occasion where the roles are reversed, and it is actually Bickle who reaches out to one of the other cab drivers, he is impeded by silence, by his inability to put words to his thoughts. He approaches Wizard, who seems to be an informal leader in the group, and attempts to define his mix of anxiety and ambition:

> Bickle: I just want to go out and really, really do something.
> Wizard: Taxi life, you mean?

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385 Ibid., 462.

386 One man interviewed actually recommends that the interviewer watch *Taxi Driver* as an example of a driver working "off the meter": "Ahh, yeah, I think just about every cabby does work off the meter [not turning the fare meter on, to ensure there is no record of the trip; usually done by giving the customer a flat fee quote]. I mean you've just got to see *Taxi Driver* with Robert De Niro in it. You know he gives you the run down, he's pocketing money. You know, you're doing a favor for your passenger and you're doing yourself a favor and you're fucking the tax man out of the deal, so it makes pretty good sense to me." Ibid., 454.

387 Hopkins, 'Gender Treachery' (1996), 98.

> Bickle: Yeah, well… No, it's... I don't know. I just wanna go out... and really… I really wanna… I got some bad ideas in my head. I just…

A tendency towards silence is in line with the classically taciturn American cowboy, but also with the alienated outsider, as Camus states in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "A man is more a man through the things he keeps to himself than through those he says."[388] But Bickel is so bound by silence, so unaccustomed to speech, that he cannot string his scattered thoughts into a coherent sentence. Schrader remarks that it is by this silence that we can identify Bickle as dangerous. This idea is exemplified by a scene in which Scorsese plays a nervous, hyperverbal cuckold, who asks Bickle to pull over, and then proceeds to describe, in chilling detail, the violent action he wants to take against his wife. All the while, Bickle remains silent. Schrader explains in his commentary for this scene that the man who talks about committing murder is actually harmless, while Bickle, who says nothing, is the one who will actually go out and do these things. The one talking is "getting it out," while Bickle "is full of these same sentiments but he can't admit it to himself." A sane man expresses his anger and frustration, while the sociopath remains quiet, choosing instead to share his thoughts only in his diary – a place where he does not need to account for his insane ideas.[389]

And it is in this imagined world of ideas that he creates a heroic persona for himself – like Hinckley's deranged idea of himself as Napoleon, or Kit's posturing as a James Dean type rebel and his satisfaction at the end of the film when one of his arresting officer's points out

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388 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1981), 79-80.

389 In writing, he gives free reign to his insanity, and instead of silence or stammering, he often breaks into a strange, sometimes ferocious, eloquence – a point I will mention again in relation to contradictions in the character in the next section.

the resemblance. With his boots and multiple pistols, Bickle is a self-styled cowboy.[390] Sport (Iris's pimp played by Harvey Keitel) and the old man at the motel, credited in the film as Iris's Timekeeper, both refer to him as "Cowboy," whereas his cab driver buddies call him "Killer." In his diary, which we hear in voice-over, he refers to himself in the third person – much the way McCandless does in his self-mythologising journal entries: "Here is a man who would not take it anymore. A man who stood up against the scum …. Here is someone who stood up!" In the mirror scene, where he famously asks who he is talking to, he answers himself, "Well, I'm the only one here." And yet there is a sense of him performing for an imagined viewer. Like Thoreau and his imagined future reader, there is a sense of self-awareness and weighted significance to the action. As the hero of his own story, he launches himself into a narrative arc that must end in heroic violence. He is a cowboy in a showdown, a bullfighter, a martyr – a man willing to face death. In the words of Schrader, Bickle sought "a glorious death," but failed to die, and is instead rewarded with minor celebrity status, hailed as a hero in the newspaper article we see at the end.

[390] This seems to be in conflict with his mohawk, which points to a 'warrior' sensibility drawn from the cowboy's ancient enemy, the Indian – another example of character contradiction.

Paradox – the Alarmingly Familiar

"Partly truth, partly fiction. A walking contradiction."

The fact that committing multiple homicide (and attempting suicide) ushers him into minor celebrity, stands as one of many contradictions in Travis Bickle, the killer, the hero. And paradox, as discussed in the chapters on Thoreau and McCandless, is central to understanding the conflicted nature of the outsider, the alienated man who confronts the Absurdity of the universe. Camus explains in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that "[t]he Absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation,"[391] and that "[t]he mind's deepest desire […] parallels man's unconscious feelings in face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity. Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal."[392]

The Absurd man is in conflict. There is a conflict between two facts. Firstly, man is driven to understand the world around him through reason. Secondly, the world around him is not reasonable; it is Absurd. This idea of the Absurd man in conflict with the world and with himself is one that pervades the film. Bickle is his own contradiction, as is made quite explicit in the film – particularly the scene where Betsy quotes the Kristofferson song: "He's a prophet… He's a prophet and a pusher. Partly truth, partly fiction. A walking contradiction." As Schrader points out in his commentary on the film, Bickle constantly, often hypocritically, contradicts his own values and ideals. He is profoundly moralistic, yet he is an alcoholic and a drug-addict who frequents pornographic theatres and eventually kills

391 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1981), 33.
392 Ibid., 22-23.

several people. He tells himself, "I gotta get healthy," and yet he lives on a diet of sweets, white bread, brandy and pills. He writes in his journal, "I don't believe that one should devote his life to morbid self-attention," and yet he is far removed from the world around him – he has no idea about contemporary music, he is usually too distracted by his own thoughts to engage in meaningful conversation, and even the perpetual writing in his journal is itself an example of his narcissism. There are many other examples of this kind of contradiction in Bickle's character; however, some of the more interesting ones are less obvious.[393]

Bickle's internal conflict is that he is earnestly seeking the love of a society he loathes. He claims that he wants to be "a person like other people," only, he hates other people. Published in 1970, Philip Slater's book, *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, is particularly relevant as a response to the socio-political context of that time (the script for *Taxi Driver* was originally written in 1972), and also deals with similar issues, such as alienation, hippie liberalism, and the war in Vietnam. Slater discusses how American culture worships independence and is constantly instilling this value into children who grow up independent, but lonely. Their human desires for community, engagement, and dependence are frustrated by a culture they help to preserve.[394] He writes that "we participate eagerly in the frustration we endure – it is

[393] He questions the cleanliness of life in a commune, while his own apartment is filthy. In the job interview he asks, "What's moonlighting?" yet he employs a varied vocabulary in his journal entries. He writes with a kind of eloquence: "There's no escape. I'm God's lonely man." He even uses words like "venal" and "morbid self-attention." Kolker, *Cinema of Loneliness* (1980), 226.

[394] "I would like to suggest three human desires that are deeply and uniquely frustrated by American culture:

(1) The desire for community – the wish to live in trust and fraternal cooperation with one's fellows in a total and visible collective entity.

not something merely done to us."[395] This self-imposed loneliness is especially true of Travis Bickle; it is self-inflicted in an almost masochistic way. Schrader points this out in the DVD interview, extrapolating Bickle's behaviour to include all of us: "We are not lonely by nature; we *make* ourselves lonely. Travis *makes* himself lonely."

Bickle often adapts his personality, attempting – and seldom succeeding – to suit the company he finds himself in. Most people use some kind of filter/highlight system to ensure that they exhibit the more suitable and fitting side of themselves within any given context. But Bickle is a sociopath, so when he changes, it is more extreme and it is more of a threat. He *becomes* different people, and it is helpful that he is portrayed by De Niro, a virtuoso chameleon. Travis Bickle is perhaps at his most chilling when we see him in transition from one character to another, or hovering in between, such as the child/monster balance he strikes 'playing guns' (the gun salesman even refers to them as toys) and spitting vicious threats into the mirror in what is certainly the film's most famous scene.[396]

Richard Stivers, in fact, claims that we are all subject to our various personalities jockeying for dominance: "Today we are all lonely and suffer from the scourge of multiple

(2) The desire for engagement – the wish to come directly to grips with social and interpersonal problems and to confront on equal terms an environment which is not composed of ego-extensions.
(3) The desire for dependence – the wish to share responsibility for the control of one's impulses and the direction of one's life." Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point* (1970), 5.

[395] Ibid.

[396] The line "You talkin' to me?" was rated number 10 on the American Film Institute's list of the 100 most memorable movie quotes. American Film Institute, 'AFI's100 years … 100 quotes,' accessed 15 August 2014, www.afi.com.
The scene is also imitated by Vincent Cassel's character in the French film *La Haine* (1995) – a moment reminiscent of Jean-Paul Belmondo's Humphrey Bogart impression in *Breathless* (1960). These references seem to reinforce the interplay of masculine personas presented across diegetic realms, as discussed earlier.

selves…."[397] Camus discusses this kind of "split" between who we are and who we project, and this division is perhaps most obvious when contemplating "the other", who may at times seem curiously without personhood:

> Men, too, secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime, make silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him but you see his incomprehensible dumb-show: you wonder why he is alive."[398]

In the film, as we watch the world through Bickle's eyes, through the glass partition of his taxi windows, we are often confronted with the strangeness of the other, "the incomprehensible dumb-show" of other human beings. But the most terrifying is perhaps what Camus describes as "the stranger who at certain seconds comes to meet us in a mirror, the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photographs is also the Absurd."[399] Bickle is at war with himself, and it is never so explosive as in the mirror scene.

On the surface, the Absurd man may easily seem amicable, even charming. Upon meeting new people he generally creates a favourable first impression and, with those he interacts with only superficially, this impression can even be maintained over long periods, for he is ever polite and reticent in such a way that some of these people find themselves seeking his approval. He carries an air of quiet superiority, which certain people seem to regard as a justified cover for some secret knowledge or power he possesses, moving them to pursue his favour, while others dismiss him as aloof, strange, or even threatening.

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[397] Stivers, *Shades of loneliness: pathologies of a technological society* (2004), 143.
[398] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1981), 20-1.
[399] Ibid., 21.

Bickle's sense of superiority often expresses itself in his secret moralism, which he applies to everyone but himself. Of course this passionate self-righteousness is compromised by his chronic self-deception. Bickle thinks he is behaving in accordance with what is right, while, in fact, he has seriously deviated from his own moral principles. The world he sees around him falls short of his standards for moral purity, and he becomes a self-appointed "avenging angel"[400] of justice, yet somehow haunted by his own moral defects, which he chooses not to see. Or perhaps he is blinded to them by the false self-image of the narcissist.

From Bickle's perspective, human failing is offset by a sense of an ideal societal norm, which is ironic considering that he is such an anomic character. This apparent conflict is explained by the fact that Bickle's character is essentially "multiple". Schrader says that he prefers to create one character with four personalities, and vary the dominant personality for each scene, than have four different characters in the film. Sometimes Bickle is the ominous outsider, sometimes the little boy, sometimes the avenger and, in a few brief scenes, he is even the charismatic romantic hero. Schrader describes him as a character who can "go from blank to angry," but it seems he can also go from menacing to charming with equal ease. When he first asks Betsy out on a date, he swaps his military coat for a burgundy jacket and suddenly he is transformed – he is young, good-looking, even "dapper". He swaggers into the office, commands Betsy's attention, wins her trust, secures a date, and leaves her gazing after him with a look betraying both mystification and attraction.

Later, of course, this first impression is shattered when he takes her to a porn theatre for their second date – an act that seems to be motivated not only by Bickle's desire to sully his

[400] Scorsese, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, ed. Ian Christie and David Thompson (2003), 54.

pedestalled image of Betsy who is "alone out of this filthy mass," but by his self-loathing or self-doubt. He must show her how dirty and worthless he is; it is as if he must sabotage any chance he has of fitting in, of being what he calls "a person like other people." Bickle approaches hegemonic American masculinity's normative value of sexual conquest, and comes close enough to show what he might be like as a typical romantic hero. The filmmakers toy with audience expectation, but quickly subvert the cliché of the male lead reconciling his inner conflict through a romantic relationship. This option is not available to the anomic male. Even as he is drawn towards society, he is also repelled – creating an even deeper sense of alienation.

Perhaps it is his laconic mystery but, whatever the reason, the outsider does seem to be attractive to certain women, as if they recognise that he is not "just another face in the crowd" and interpret his strangeness as something exotic and alluring. Although, of course, it can only be a very superficial kind of attraction, and the more time the woman spends with the outsider, the more likely she is to discover his callousness, even his cruelty. Betsy is attracted to Bickle at first, which she admits on their coffee date;[401] she also says, "I don't believe I've ever met anyone quite like you." On the second date, when Travis takes her to the porn theatre, she says with a wry smile, appearing at once amused and intrigued, "You've got to be kidding … This is a dirty movie." But Travis says, rather oddly, "No, it's a movie…" and that lots of couples go there. She relents, possibly excited and intrigued by the

[401] Travis: I felt when I walked in that there was something between us. There was an impulse that we were both following. So that gave me the right to come in and talk to you. Otherwise, I never would have felt I had the right to talk to you. I never would have had the courage to talk to you. With him, I felt there was nothing, and I could sense it. When I walked in, I knew I was right. Did you feel that way?
Betsy: I wouldn't be here if I didn't.

strangeness of it all, or simply out of politeness, but she is soon appalled by the content of the obviously pornographic film and gets up to leave, saying, "I don't know why I came here." She cannot account for her actions; she acts against her better judgement, compelled by the mystery, her fascination with the "otherness" of the outsider. In opposition to the charming Bickle, who makes the suave first impression on Betsy, there is the awkward, unsettling Bickle who attempts a conversation with the Concession Girl at a porno theatre – a context in which *any* kind of conversation would be inappropriate. But he is simply unaware, existing in his own anomic world, independent of social expectations.

Another scene that suggests Bickle is able to relate well to people on a superficial level is the one in the all-night delicatessen that gets robbed. As Bickle walks in, the storekeeper greets him first (by name), calls him 'El Titere' (English: 'the puppet/marionette', apparently a nickname), and then delivers a Spanish greeting. Bickle returns the storekeeper's Spanish greeting and also mentions his name. All of this implies that the two men have had conversations previously and have established some level of positive rapport.

> Storekeeper: Hey, Travis, El Titere. Que pasa?
> Travis: Hi, Melio. Que pasa?

Moments later a "strung-out junkie" holds a gun on Melio and tries to rob the store, but Bickle, unseen by the junkie, comes up behind him, calls out to him, and then shoots him as he turns around. Despite the fact that the audience might interpret it as justified violence, the scene still carries an element of shock, as it is the first time we see Bickle kill. This is an additional instance where the audience is shown the outwardly friendly side of Bickle, only to be suddenly exposed to his capacity for violence. It is a scene I will examine again when I discuss Bickle's role as observer.

There are also rare scenes showing brief moments of self-awareness, such as the one where he stammeringly explains to Wizard that he has "some bad ideas in [his] head", or where he expresses immediate regret, saying, "Damn! Goddamn!" with his head in his hands after smashing his television. But although these scenes seem to show him catching a glimpse of the great mental undertow sweeping him inexorably towards violence, Bickle is generally oblivious to the versions of himself that threaten to harm both himself and others.

Richard Blake, in his article entitled 'Redeemed in Blood', links Bickle's inability to connect with others to a form of solitude that eventually leads to violence:

> Without social skills to cultivate relationships, he loses both the male group and the companionship of his idealized woman. Unable to gain acceptance by either, he retreats further into his self-destructive isolation.[402]

This retreat, however, is temporary, and must "[end] with violent action,"[403] highlighting the crucial roles of violence and death in *Taxi Driver*, which I will discuss in greater depth in the next section. Bickle's loneliness is emphasised through Betsy's refusal of his romantic gestures, as well as his failure to integrate with the male group and gain homosocial validation. He initially responds to these rejections by recoiling further into a kind of self-imposed loneliness before he launches back into society with extreme violent action. There is a sense of solitary confinement conveyed by scenes of Bickle in the small apartment, from which he plans his attack. In this space, he is like a caged animal – by turns restless and

[402] Blake, 'Redeemed in Blood' (1996), 6.
[403] Ibid., 3.

recumbent – but eventually the cage door swings open, and he propels himself into his deadly assault.

In this section, I have noted various paradoxes in the character of Travis Bickle, the man who makes himself lonely. These hypocrisies and incongruities are the result of an inner conflict, a divided self, because in the absence of homosocial validation, the alienated man is another man who is not a man. As Betsy says, he is "a walking contradiction." The ultimate paradox of this character, however, is that he is a man constantly moving through the crowded streets of one of the world's most densely populated cities, and yet he is utterly alone. He is immersed in the society that relegates him to the periphery.

The Masculinity of Violence

"By the time you read this I will be dead."

Violence is integral to our understanding of the alienated man. It is at once his downfall and his salvation. For Bickle it was attempted self-destruction that made him a hero. For Hinckley, it was a deluded attempt at becoming a hero, which destroyed him. For both men, violence is a vehicle to escape from the cycle of disempowerment and isolation, to either break out of the lonely spiral, or to break into the realm of social acceptance. And it is also an aspect of hegemonic American masculinity[404] that is exaggerated to the point of sociopathic criminal acts in the cases of Bickle and Hinckley.

Scorsese and De Niro are also strongly associated with extreme violence – particularly in films they have worked on together, such as *Raging Bull*, *Goodfellas*, *Cape Fear*, and *Casino*. Gretchen Schwartz even argues that De Niro "[portrays] violence as something essential in the masculine composite; this presupposition constitutes his signature."[405] Travis Bickle is an ex-marine. A history of violence is part of his identity. *Taxi Driver*, the second collaboration between Scorsese and De Niro, "may be the first film to exploit the 'PVS' afflicted Veteran."[406] Jason Katzman, in his article which charts the passage of the Vietnam war veteran "from outcast to cliché", describes the usage of the term PVS:

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404 Kimmel, *Guyland* (2008), 56.
405 Schwartz, "'You Talkin' to Me?'" (2008), 443.
406 Katzman, 'From Outcast to Cliché: How Film Shaped, Warped and Developed the Image of the Vietnam Veteran 1967-1990' in *Journal of American Culture* (1993), 10. [he references Palmer, 183]

> Until 1980, the problems veterans had after the war were often attributed to 'PVS' or 'Post Vietnam Syndrome'. This moniker was used predominantly by the mass media; it offered up the negative image of the disturbed veteran often strung-out on drugs and prone to sudden acts of ungovernable violence and criminality.[407]

Susan Jeffords describes the practice of "debriding" – medical process by which foreign material and contaminated or devitalised tissue is removed in order to expose the surrounding healthy tissue.[408] In her essay, 'Debriding Vietnam,' she uses this image as an overarching metaphor through which to examine a kind of "cultural debriding" of masculinity that took place in American media, and films in particular, in the 1980s. She calls it "a mechanism for a revised repudiation of the feminine and a regeneration of the masculine (white) in contemporary U.S. social discourse."[409] She contrasts the Vietnam war films of the 1980s, such as *First Blood* (1982) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), with earlier Hollywood war films in terms of how the protagonists relate to society. While the earlier films focus on a marginalised, or otherwise alienated, character who is eventually reintegrated into some sort of community, the later films elevate the value of individualism, revolving around a marginalised protagonist who becomes increasingly opposed to mainstream society. In this sense, Bickle is a kind of precursor to Rambo, who can be seen as a simplified, sanitised blockbuster version of the alienated war veteran who cannot be reintegrated into mainstream society and is prone to extreme violence. Though it is more obvious in the case of Rambo, both characters draw on the American mythography of the war in Vietnam,

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[407] Ibid., 9-10.
[408] Jeffords, 'Debriding Vietnam: The Resurrection of the White American Male,' in *Feminist Studies* (1988), 525
[409] Ibid., 529.

which posits "Vietnam veterans as emblematic of the condition of all American men, not just those who went to war."[410]

Bickle has a complex relationship with violence. Despite being a war veteran (whose previous encounters with violence are conveyed with that subtle, yet arresting, image of the thick messy scar sprawled across his left latissimus dorsi muscle), Travis Bickle is a man who seems, predominantly, quite uncomfortable with violence. For example, we see his extremely unsettled expression as the cuckold on the backseat of his cab explains how and where he intends to shoot his wife. Bickle does not turn around; instead, he adjusts his rear-view mirror – seemingly to keep an eye on this man who has just described the appalling violence he intends to carry out against his adulterous wife. The cuckold interprets his stare and awkward silence as judgement and responds by addressing the mirror (ostensibly Bickle's reflection) and repeatedly asking the question: "You must think I'm pretty sick, right?" There is no response from Bickle, who remains almost completely silent throughout the scene – refusing to answer the cuckold's nervous questions with anything more than a reluctant "yeah." It may be that he is quietly judging him, or perhaps something in him realises that the man reflected in the rear-view is actually a more loquacious version of himself.

Later, he is contrasted with another character, Melio, the storekeeper, in terms of the way they deal with violence. Though Bickle is the one who actually shoots the junkie – the first time the audience sees him kill someone – he is immediately nervous about his unlicensed gun, and leaves quickly. We actually hear the squeal of tyres as he skids off in his cab. This swift and jittery exit is distinctly different from Melio's calm and weary ease as he casually

[410] Ibid.

picks up a steel pipe and begins to beat the limp body of the scrawny youth. He seems far more comfortable with violence than Bickle.[411]

Bickle is also an uneasy witness to violence, even if he is the one committing it. Perhaps he is haunted by the brutality of war, causing him to distance himself, mentally and emotionally, from violent acts. And yet he exhibits an unusually *intimate* relationship with his weapons, his guns and ammunition. As I will explain further in my discussion of object constancy later in this chapter, Bickle's relationship with objects is a kind of surrogate for human relationships. There is a strange sinister tenderness in the way he cross-cuts his bullets for maximum explosive damage.[412] Easy Andy introduces him to the guns in manner that is cool and charming – the way a mutual acquaintance might introduce Bickle to a group of friends; he learns their names. At the shooting range, he improves his skills and learns how to handle them better. Alone in his room, he plays boyish games with them. He attaches a knife to his boot with duct tape, a gun with a slide down his arm; he tucks them into secret places about his person. And then, finally, he employs them in an extremely bloody shootout that brings the action to its inevitable climax.[413]

At the end, we have Bickle shooting Sport, Iris's pimp. Bickle seems to move stiffly and actually struggles to remove the gun from his pocket before he shoots the pimp in the

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411 This, incidentally, is a rare instance of an action that takes place without Bickle watching. Scorsese took great pains to shoot *Taxi Driver* entirely from Bickle's perspective.

412 This detail explains how a single shot could blow all four fingers from the old man's right hand in the shootout climax.

413 David Robinson, in his review for *The Times*, called it "a stupid orgy of violence." Robinson, 'Down these mean streets' in *The Times* (20 August 1976), 7. In his DVD extras interview, Michael Chapman, the cinematographer, notes with regard to the bloodshed in the final scene: "In order that they could keep their 'R' rating … they had to finally promise to desaturate the colours."

stomach. At the same time he delivers a childish 'movie line': "Suck on this!" He then turns around and marches back to the steps outside a nearby building, where he sits down for a while. He seems to be collecting his thoughts and trying to calm his nerves after the traumatic event of shooting a man, albeit an obvious villain. This is in stark contrast to the stereotypically masculine action hero, who casually kills 'bad guys' between puffs of a cigarette and muttered one-liners. However, the scene that follows the shooting of Sport is where Bickle enters the brothel and kills two more men. Though he is still stiff and mechanical in his movements, he appears to have gained resolve after the first killing. He is cold, silent, and unrelenting.

Camus describes this 'masculine' desire to take action, to '*do* something' in his philosophical treatise; he writes that "[t]here always comes a time when one must choose between contemplation and action. This is called becoming a man."[414] Earlier in the film we see Bickle nervous and apologetic at his job interview; he takes no action when he watches Sport drag Iris out of his cab; the somewhat nerdy, Tom, frightens him away by politely asking him to move his taxi. But, by the end, Travis Bickle crosses this threshold into 'manhood' by moving on from being shy and fearful, graduating from boyish fantasies of mirrored guns and imagined bloodshed, to the real massacre that eventually takes place in the film's violent climax. Violence becomes a reaction against the state of a meaningless existence. Violence changes things. It leaves a mark, a stain. For better or worse, the world is altered by violence. And, for Bickle, this becomes an opportunity to assume some sense of agency, and become a man of consequence.

[414] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1981), 81.

The shooting has a certain hallucinogenic quality and a sense of the protagonist's discomfort reaching a breaking point. Bickle's growing psychological disquiet, as he views a hazy, impressionistic world through the surreally rain-soaked windows of his taxi cab, culminates in a mental snap. Schrader says he "moves into a fantasy world of blood" in the final shooting in which he kills three people, and we see the violent action slightly sped up – creating an interesting visual effect in contrast with the slow motion shots throughout the rest of the film. The move from slow motion to fast motion suggests a shift from passive to active – Bickle has finally flung himself free from the Absurd routine of his driving schedule and actually *done* something (albeit multiple homicide). Elsaesser refers to violence as "the defensive gesture of the self-alienated male in a society he does not understand and over which he has no control."[415] Bickle finally makes this gesture in an attempt to gain control and create a sense of purpose for himself. Violence seems to be his last desperate attempt to engage society – an attempt that unexpectedly succeeds when he is hailed as a hero in the end.

A consciousness of the inevitable nature of death creates a philosophical emancipation, or what Sartre describes as the "divine irresponsibility of the condemned," [416] because fascination with death liberates man.[417] From the opening titles of *Taxi Driver*, announcing in red on black that "COLUMBIA PICTURES PRESENTS […] ROBERT DE NIRO IN," followed by the rise of Bernard Herrmann's score – densely terrifying, recalling the Hitchcock horrors and thrillers for which he composed – the audience is warned of a

415 Elsaesser, 'The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the 1970s' in *The Last Great American Picture Show – New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, et al. (2004), 283.
416 Sartre, 'An Explication of *The Stranger*' in *Camus – A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Germain Brée (1962), 110-11.
417 Ibid., 111.

foreboding and inevitable threat. It is the threat of violence behind the eyes we see reflected in the rear-view mirror; Bickle's eyes are framed, captured, peeping through the "letter-box". This introductory shot of him sets the tone for how we will begin to see Travis Bickle. Robert Kolker comments that the two settings that dominate how we view him are his cramped apartment and his taxi cab – "like a coffin," or a sealed fate.

There are also two instances where Bickle reveals his suicidal tendency: The first time is when he is addressing his reflection in the mirror, he says, as he points the gun at himself squeezing the trigger, "You're dead." Though there is an imagined adversary, all the audience sees is Bickle seeing himself.[418] The second time is in his letter to Iris which he closes with the line: "By the time you read this I will be dead." Hinckley also displays the same fated suicidal path. There is a photograph of him in which he strikes a similar pose to Bickle – with a gun to his head. He also wrote a letter to Jodie Foster, the actress who portrays Iris, two hours prior to the shooting. The letter opens with the line: "There is a definite possibility that I will be killed in my attempt to get Reagan."

Finally, Bickle is essentially a self-destructive character. Taking a "nice girl" like Betsy to a pornographic theatre is merely a symptom of an underlying drive towards a kind of Freudian *thanatos*, an unconscious compulsion towards death.

> [I]n a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of Absurdity. All healthy men having thought of their

[418] Interestingly, Scorsese chose to shoot De Niro's *reflection* in the mirror, as opposed to most movie 'mirror shots' which simply have the subject face the camera, or use an over-the-shoulder angle. We can tell because De Niro's mole is on the other side.

> own suicide, it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death.[419]

Bickle's whole life is a self-sabotage, and yet he even fails at suicide. In an Absurd twist, he becomes a hero. Ironically, it is death's inevitability that is the lifeblood of the Absurd philosophy. Without a healthy sense of imminent death, the Absurd man has nothing to contemplate. The idea that there is no alternative, no escape from death, drives him to an ever richer and more proactive experience of life. In *Taxi Driver*, Wizard waxes ridiculous as he tries to give Bickle advice on life: "Because you got no choice, anyway. I mean, we're all fucked. More or less, you know."[420] He admits that he is "no Bertrand Russell," but he does convey some sense of man's fatedness. In his journal Bickle reflects on scenes leading up to the climax and the killing: "Now I see it clearly. My whole life has pointed in one direction. I see that now. There never has been any choice for me."

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[419] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1981), 13.

[420] Wizard's speech is in some ways similar to the advice Vince Vaughn's character, Wayne Westerberg, gives to McCandless in *Into the Wild*. Both are older males, who do not seem to understand the problems the two younger men try to express, and instead attempt to divert their attention away from their personal crises. Wizard, after some philosophical attempts, simply tells Bickle that he envies his youth, and that he should go out, get drunk and get laid, instead of worrying so much. Westerberg also points to the fact that McCandless is a *young* man, and warns him against thinking too much.

Isolation

"Well I'm the only one here."

Ultimately, even after the colossal act of violence, it becomes clear that "to shoot or not to shoot; to act or not to act" makes no difference. After Travis Bickle is hailed as a hero, we see him in his same old jacket, back with the cabbies who are still exchanging bizarre yet trivial anecdotes, and then we have the closing moment where he seemingly catches a glimpse of his own madness in the rear-view mirror. When Scorsese asked Schrader what happens to Bickle after he drops Betsy off, Schrader said he would start all over again. This moment is Scorsese's interpretation of that comment. And I agree with Robert Kolker that this glance into the mirror implies that Bickle has not recovered – "[t]he 'salvation' he receives […] in no way changes the central character or his inability to understand himself or his world.[421] Bickle will return to violence again and again as he attempts to free himself from the cycle of meaningless existence. Nothing has changed and his life still so desperately needs that "sense of some place to go."

And as he returns to the beginning, we find Bickle once again alone in his taxi, peering into a mirror. The crushing reality of Travis Bickle's life is the fact of his alienation. He tries drugs, alcohol, working long hours, pornography, romantic endeavour, noble rescue, violent action,

[421] "Scorsese has rooted his film in the very earthbound context of the madness of a lonely, barely coherent individual who cannot make sane associations between the distorted fragments of his perceptions. The 'salvation' he receives, the recognition he gains for gunning down a mafioso and freeing a young runaway from a brothel, is simply ironic. It is the result of other people's distorted perceptions, and in no way changes the central character or his inability to understand himself or his world. If anything, it aggravates it, for there is an indication at the film's end that Travis Bickle has some glimmering and fleeting recognitions of his madness, but only enough to make him turn away from that recognition." Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman*. (1980), 225.

even suicide, but nothing – and certainly not fifteen minutes of fame – can loosen the vice grip of his loneliness. He is the outsider within society, alienated in his home country.

In his book, *Malignant Self Love* (subtitled: Narcissism Revisited), Dr Sam Vaknin explains that narcissists are often shocked to discover that no one is listening, that they have been left talking to themselves, and the reason for this is their "perverse object constancy."[422] He cites developmental psychologist Margaret Mahler's theory on infants coping with the mother's absence by finding appropriate substitutes, knowing and trusting that she will return.

> As the infant's sense of time and verbal skills evolve, it becomes more immune to delayed gratification and tolerant of inevitable separation. Piaget, the renowned child psychologist, concurred with Mahler and coined the term "object constancy" to describe the dynamics she observed. … Pathological narcissism is a reaction to deficient bonding and dysfunctional attachment. Object relations in narcissists are infantile and chaotic. Many narcissists have no psychological-object constancy at all. In other words, many of them do not feel that other people are benign, reliable, helpful, constant, predictable, and trustworthy.[423]

The narcissist compensates for this inability, or unwillingness, to relate to real people by inventing surrogate-objects, mental avatars, mental representations of meaningful or significant others. "Hence his dismay when confronted with real people, their needs, feelings, preferences, and choices."[424]

Considering his private world filled with vitriolic journal entries, a deep-seated distrust of almost all people, violent fantasies, a virgin goddess to sully (Betsy), and a child whore to

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422 Vaknin, 'The Narcissist's Object Constancy' in *Malignant Self Love* (1999), accessed 23 October 2013, 2013, samvak.tripod.com/journal77.html.
423 Ibid.
424 Ibid.

redeem (Iris), Travis Bickle is a classic example of the pathological narcissist with almost a complete absence of object constancy. He is a narcissistic sociopath, and he is all alone.

Several times throughout the film, we find Bickle talking to himself – the obvious case in the mirror, his journal entries read in voice-over, and the tragic one-sided telephone conversation. Bickle calls Betsy after their disastrous second date, but we do not hear her voice – only Bickle's desperate words hanging awkwardly in the air, like a disjointed monologue. Even his words are lonely. And he comments in his voice-over narration that she stopped coming to the phone after that. His words, as an expression of himself, are not received or reflected by another person. Bickle has a profound longing to be understood and appreciated. Berdyaev discusses this need to make a connection to "the Other Self":

> Non-comprehension, or the Ego's unfaithful reflection in another, may also awaken a sense of solitude. … The Ego experiences a profound need to be truly reflected in another, to be affirmed and confirmed by the Other Self. … The Ego seeks its reflection in a mirror or in water, in order to confirm its existence in the Other Self; in reality, the Ego is seeking communion with … a friend, who would identify himself with it and thus confirm it, who would admire it, listen to it; in a word, reflect it. Therein lies the deep significance of love. Narcissism, as the objective reflection of the Ego, represents its failure to achieve this; the subject remains absorbed in himself, and has no outlet or escape.[425]

In the mirror scene, Bickle addresses his reflection, imagining a confrontation which would give him the opportunity to draw his gun. He delivers the following line: "You talkin' to me? You talkin' to me? You talkin' to *me*? Then who the hell else are you talkin' to? You talkin' to me? Well I'm the only one here." He is the narcissist alone in his room, talking to himself, and his dissociation from the rest of the world, from reality, is further emphasised by the fairly high volume of the diegetic sound in this scene. The noise of an aeroplane flying over

[425] Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society* (1938), 95-6.

and the everyday sounds of people in their apartments create a sense in which society carries on, completely uninterested and unchanged by the superficially innocuous antics of Travis Bickle, playing games in his little room, in his cell, in his own crazy skull – chattering to himself like a madman. Though it seems that Bickle is quite unaware that his behaviour is strange, he does seem to realise that he is veering closer and closer the brink of violent action, and he is pleased, for it is action that he seeks – real action with consequences. He wants to break out of his cell and make some kind of violent impact on a world that would prefer to ignore him.

One of the simplest, but also most effective, ways in which Bickle's isolation is emphasised is through direct contrast with groups, especially small societies of people which seem happy, entertaining, or in other ways "positive." Bickle is always driving past throngs of pedestrians, and he watches them from his taxi cab, his moving cage of glass and steel. Adding to this physical barrier, a further, psychological, factor separating him is the impression he has of their sense of togetherness – a perception epitomised by the slow-motion couple he sees walking hand-in-hand. He dismisses women saying, "They're like a union," implying that women have formed some kind of society which conspires against him, because – as a narcissist – people cannot simply be ignoring him; they must be entering into organised groups to boycott his company in particular. Senator Palantine, whom Bickle moulds into some imagined adversary, is another example of this contrast – best exemplified by his slogan, "We <u>are</u> the people," but also in the lines from one of his speeches.[426] And, finally,

426 "Walt Whitman, that great American poet... spoke for all of us when he said:
'I am the man. I suffered. I was there'. Today I say to you... <u>We</u> are the people. <u>We</u> suffered. <u>We</u> were there. We the people suffered in Vietnam. We the people suffered, we still suffer... from unemployment, inflation... crime and corruption. […] And it is time to let <u>the people</u> rule."

Bickle is isolated by the absence of family. His family is never seen and is only mentioned in a letter/anniversary card he may or may not actually send to a married couple that may not even exist.

Another fact that contributes to Bickle's self-imposed isolation is his sweeping condemnation of almost everyone and everything around him. Judgement automatically separates the judger from the judged. In response to Bickle's speech regarding the low moral standing of her pimp, Sport, and her whole sordid life, Iris, the twelve-year-old prostitute, says, "What makes you so high and mighty?" This trite rhetorical question is perhaps the ideal way of expressing the division that is created between the "high" and the "low" – even if this division exists only in the mind of the self-appointed judge. The only time Bickle actually expresses his critical views is when he feels that people are truly interested, really listening, which is rare for the outsider. Though he launches into sometimes explosive diatribes when in conversation with Betsy (concerning her co-worker, Tom); Palantine (concerning the filthy state of the city); Iris (concerning Sport and her life of prostitution), the full weight of his judgement is only communicated to the audience through his journal entries delivered in voice-over and through point-of-view camera angles in slow motion which, in particular, Scorsese often uses to suggest Bickle's racism. Some examples of his implied racism include: the slow motion tracking shot of black pimps in the diner, the fact that his first killing is the black junkie, the way he aims his gun at the television when the image is of a black man dancing with a white girl – all pointing to Bickle's strong and unexpressed racist views. In Schrader's original draft of the script, all the people Bickle killed were black, but the producers asked him to rewrite it in order to avoid controversy. The theme of racism remains, however, and Schrader comments that Bickle simply "needs

somebody to hate," that it did not necessarily have to be black people. Concerning animosity, Berdyaev posits the following theory:

> Dispute, conflict, and even hatred are all social manifestations which often serve to suppress or to allay the sense of solitude. Their ultimate effect, however, is to increase that sense.[427]

Many clubs, societies, and political organisations throughout history have been founded on the exclusion of others for various reasons, including race. A hatred of other races has the potential to make the outsider feel more united: a sense of being included through the exclusion of certain others. However, as Berdyaev points out, this is a false solution, and even this temporary relief is kept from Bickle since he does not express his racist views. He remains alone with his hatred.

The only time he verbalises any kind of racial comment is in a voice-over journal entry, and it comes out as another of his strange contradictions: "Some people don't take spooks [as passengers in their cabs]." He uses the word "spooks," a racist term, and then says that he does not discriminate in terms of who he allows into his vehicle. It forms part of Bickle's grand delusion – he conjures this image of himself, *for* himself, as a kind of enlightened man who graciously accepts all people into his cab, and yet he uses the same journal to pen rambling condemnations of almost every human being in New York City. This once again indicates the degree to which Bickle is estranged not only from society, but from his own mind and feelings.

[427] Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society* (1938), 95.

I believe this element of miscommunication, and the consequent misunderstanding, is crucial to our definition of the outsider character. His mystery is now intriguing, now terrifying. There is a kind of mutual incomprehension that exists between the outsider and the world around him. He is regarded as a mysterious figure and he, in turn, sees the world in terms of invented "surrogate-objects" and "mental avatars". People become symbols, stripped of their complex personhood – they become images, things. As Camus explains:

> I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning[.] What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me – that is what I understand.[428]

In a related sense, Schrader describes "the fetishistic nature of solitary existence" – he says, "objects assume importance and become the kind of people you live with." Bickle is ominously methodical in the way he treats his guns and especially in the manner he fashions the gun slide.

Though Bickle considers the recent past important enough to record in his journal, the viewer sees only allusions to a more distant past, and even these are rare. We have the letter to his parents, and we know from the job interview that he was honourably discharged from the marines. There are visual clues like his jacket, the Vietnamese flag in his apartment, and the mohawk which, as Schrader recalls, was something a war vet friend of Scorsese's suggested – the friend said that certain American soldiers would shave their hair into a mohawk as a sign to the other men that they were about to "go over the top," to enter the frontline and almost certainly be killed. But these are only "glimpses of a kind of back-

[428] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1981), 51.

story"[429] – far subtler than flashbacks to muddy jungle violence, or home-movie-style images of childhood. Schrader says, "The secret of characters like this is that they just appear… they're sort of like avatars."[430] Like Meursault, Bickle is more a figure than a man; he is a symbol with no past because, like an archetype, he has always been – lurking, somewhere outside of time.

The Absurd man seems to exist in an eternal present. A man with no real sense of the weight of the past is also free from guilt which cannot exist in its proper form without a deep awareness of the past and its implications for the present. As Camus notes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "… that is all [the Absurd man] feels – his irreparable innocence."[431] Bickle's hypocrisy, his constant failure to uphold the standards and values he imposes on everyone else, seems to cause him no feelings of guilt. He does, however, seem to be haunted by something. He reflects in his journal, "Loneliness has *followed* me my whole life…"[432] and I think it is of interest that he uses the idea of being pursued by loneliness – it is not simply a circumstance he finds himself in; it is a personified and relentless something stalking him throughout his life. He does not truly experience guilt – for 'a sense of guilt' by definition requires that the guilty man is aware of that culpability. Perhaps this sensation that causes so much paranoia for Bickle is in fact a sense of guilt, which he has mistaken for "loneliness." He 'jokes' in the job interview that his record is clean – like his conscience, yet he suffers from extreme insomnia, which might suggest that a guilty conscience is actually keeping him awake.

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429 Ibid.
430 Ibid.
431 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1981), 53.
432 My emphasis

Daniel Dahlstrom writes that "[a]nything like a public conscience is an oxymoron, or a fabrication ... conscience must be the loneliest of discourses."[433] Perhaps it is because of this relationship between conscience and loneliness that Bickle easily files his sense of guilt under his overarching sense of isolation, which creates yet another internal conflict: his conscience is plagued by a guilt he cannot, or refuses to, acknowledge – it remains only as a nebulous force pursuing him, driving him always closer to the edge.

There is a terrible monotony implied by an eternal present – there is no past to learn from; no future to look forward to. There is no sense that today is better than yesterday and there is no hope for improvement in tomorrow. Bickle's life is flooded by a steady stream of pills and alcohol. His insomnia and constant driving – up and down the same streets – lead him to comment in his journal: "The days move along with regularity, over and over. One day indistinguishable from the next. A long continuous chain."[434] His repeated trips to view pornographic films add to his dazed sense of the world around him for, as Schrader says, "Pornography is like alcohol – it's kind of an anaesthetic – it dulls you." This dulled experience of the world, a warped and hazy world becoming steadily less comprehensible, serves to isolate Bickle from society even further, and also serves as an example of Bickle's experience of the Absurd in the second sense – that of sudden lucidity regarding routine and meaningless repetition.

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433 Dahlstrom, 'Conscience: The Lonely Discourse' in *Loneliness*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (1998), 58.
434 This entry, which follows directly after the one where he states that he is God's lonely man, has another line after those I quoted: "Then suddenly, there is change." This "change" is presumably his decision to purchase a gun (or four), as this line segues into the scene with Easy Andy, purveyor of unlicensed firearms and other illegal items. It is, however, a change that comes suddenly after enduring tedium.

The Observer Observed

"Didn't you ever try lookin' in your own eyeballs in the mirror?"

Our view, as the audience, is aligned with Bickle's perspective from the outset. His distorted vision of the world – filtered through a mental state altered by drugs, alcohol, insomnia and elements of psychopathy – is immediately established as our vision. The psychological state that isolates Bickle from society is the very one we are forced to assume. The first image of Travis Bickle is an extreme close-up of his troubled eyes, which move in dreamy slow motion, as Schrader points out in his commentary. What we see next, and throughout the film, is from his perspective: dark streets we cannot see through the rain-soaked windows, and night lights flaring with a hallucinatory effect. This is not our world. It is a world warped by the vision of a sociopath.

In her formative essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey describes the two aspects involved in the pleasure of "looking" as derived from "the conventional cinematic situation":

> The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen. Thus, in film terms, one implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the other demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like.[435]

[435] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975), 11.

If mainstream Hollywood cinema shapes and perpetuates the power of the male gaze, Schrader and Scorsese take this to an extreme in *Taxi Driver*. To some extent I have already addressed the voyeuristic erotic pleasure of looking at the human objects on screen – the fetishisation of De Niro's body and the objectification of Betsy (accentuated by our complicit idealisation of her through our identification with Bickle). What I would like to focus on here is the latter pleasure of identification with Travis Bickle – an identification so strong that it may have catalysed John Hinckley's descent from lonely outcast to homicidal sociopath.

Martin Scorsese, as I mentioned before, can be described as the film's chief 'gaze-director'. He guides our vision based on the blueprint provided by Schrader, whose script rule was that the story should always be told from Bickle's perspective, or he should at least be in the scene.[436] The intention is to plunge the audience into his world. Though it is impossible to present a view as narrow as that of a first-person narrator in a novel, Scorsese is meticulous in shooting *Taxi Driver* from Bickle's perspective. Robert Kolker calls it "a single-minded film," citing its "consistency and coherence." He also says that "so much is told by looks – how he looks, what he looks at," and identifies "the eye" as a kind of symbol that appears throughout the film, emphasising the significance of Bickle's view.[437] We learn about Bickle through the way he looks at things. Scorsese mentions a "sense of guilt and paranoia in terms of camera movement," such as the way Bickle stares at black men.

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436 Schrader, however, capitulates to Scorsese's conception of the script. He states in his commentary: "I did not direct, so whatever comments I have are not really from inside the director's vision."

437 Bickel to Betsy: "I saw in your eyes ... that you're not a happy person," and "You know you have beautiful eyes." [He resorts to cliché for lack of conversation.]
Sport wears a ring with an eye on it. There are also various shots that emphasise Bickle's eyes throughout the film.

The vision is so profoundly focused, in part, because Bickle is lonely, isolated from the other; he cannot even see from their point of view. Wolfe describes the phenomenon more eloquently:

> All this hideous doubt, despair, and confusion of the soul a lonely man must know, for he is united to no image save that which he creates himself, he is bolstered by no other knowledge save that which he can gather for himself with the vision of his own eyes and brain.[438]

And it is this soul, this brain, this isolated vision, into which the audience is immersed. A significant example of this is when Bickle is mentally rehearsing a heroic diatribe in the mirror:

> Listen, you fuckers, you screw-heads. Here is a man who would not take it anymore. Who would not let –
> [edit: cut to the same action as the beginning of the previous line]
> Listen, you fuckers, you screw-heads. Here is a man who would not take it anymore. A man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit. Here is someone who stood up!

We are so totally immersed in his world, his perspective, to the point that his very thoughts dictate the shots we see – when he makes a mistake in his diary entry, or the speech he is mentally rehearsing, and has to start over, we see the error – cut – and then start over with him.

Another factor that heightens the somewhat disturbing pleasure we take in watching and identifying with Travis Bickle, is that there is immense power in the perspective of the outsider. The man, who is not at the centre of the action, tends to have a richer view of the

[438] Wolfe, 'God's Lonely Man' (1965), 196.

events that unfold. For example, in the American classic, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, it is not Gatsby who tells the story, but Nick Carraway, lurking at the edge of the action, observing. And, as Mulvey argues, it is the scopophilic, unobserved observer who has the most power and enjoyment in looking.

Travis Bickle, the hermit crab, the invisible man on the margin, is a master of observing while remaining unobserved. In the DVD interview, Schrader explains that he calls this character "the peeper – kind of an outsider who looks into the windows of a culture …." However, in the case of Bickle, there is an air of menace to his observation. He watches like a lion stalking its prey, like a spy or an assassin. With one eye shut, he aims both his gaze and his gun. The people observed are not merely objects, but targets. One example is a kind of extreme version of Mulvey's "pleasure in viewing" principle: We watch Bickle watching television. In two separate scenes he aims his gun at the TV – once at a young black man dancing, and again at a romantic couple in a soap opera. His 'victims' are characters on TV, epitomising the unsuspecting object of the gaze.

In another scene, he witnesses a crime in progress at the convenience store. The youth attempting the robbery does not see him, until Bickle says, "Hey." The man turns, still holding his gun, and Bickle shoots him. Just prior to this scene we see Bickle approach a secret service agent at a political rally. Bickle is able to identify someone whose job it is to watch without being noticed because he is recognising his own kind. He even tells the agent, "I'm very observant," and then pretends that he would like to be recruited. An exception to this trend occurs early on when Betsy catches him staring at her. She tells Tom, who asks

him to move his cab. Bickle hurries to escape. When noticed, he loses power, and retreats into his shell.

The question I would like to address directly now, is the same question which has been implicit throughout this chapter: To what degree does the lonely man conform to hegemonic American masculinity and in what ways does he deviate? Is the lonely, alienated man on the margin a deviant or an everyman? Thomas Wolfe's position is unequivocal in the essay Schrader quotes on the title page of his script: loneliness is far from the unique experience of a few "solitary men"; rather it is a "fact of human existence."[439] Travis Bickle is the man in a shell, the crustacean at once hiding and hunting, descending into the primordial. Is he only wrestling with the pain of being alone, or is it, more generally, the pain of being a man?[440]

This idea of a common male experience, particularly of solitude, is also suggested by *L'Etranger* – one of the books Schrader reread in preparation for the script. In this novella, Camus presents a kind of a priori masculine experience – defining maleness as something self-evident, and yet inexplicable. For example, after Meursault writes a letter to assist his friendly acquaintance, Raymond, in humiliating a woman, "Raymond gave me a very firm handshake and said that men always understand each other."[441] Another friend, Céleste, when asked, in court, what he thought of Meursault, said that "[he] was a man." When the prosecutor asks what he meant by this, Céleste "stated that everybody knew what that

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439 Wolfe, 'God's Lonely Man' (1965), 193.
440 cf. Francis Bacon's famous quote: "He who makes a *beast* of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man." Bacon, 'Anecdotes of the Revd. Percival Stockdale' in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, vol. II (1897), 333.
441 Camus, *The Stranger* (1989), 33.

meant."[442] There is sense of this alienated, anomic man as a kind of universal man. The enduring resonance of this character was confirmed in a survey conducted over sixty years after the book's publication:

> [In 2005] academics Lisa Jardine and Annie Watkins conducted a survey, among women only, to find out what 'watershed' novel had most sustained and helped them through difficult times. *Jane Eyre* was, by far, the most frequently cited.
> A similar survey of [British] men [mostly media types, academics and students] … had *The Outsider* as the book most often mentioned as having helped them get through life.[443]

From the hundreds of men interviewed about their formative reading, it emerged that "fiction was a rite of passage into manhood during painful adolescence," with the average man's identity-defining reading occurring during his mid-teens.[444] The authors of the article, however, offer little analysis on why exactly Meursault remains such an influential figure in fiction for men in particular. Nevertheless, their findings do seem at once to echo the tacit understanding implied in the novel, and also be echoed by men regarding another alienated male who, through a single act of extreme violence, suddenly gains the attention of a society that had previously ignored him: Travis Bickle. Interviews with the *Taxi Driver* filmmakers reveal a sort of passionate identification similar to interviews with Penn, Krakauer, and Eddie Vedder regarding Christopher McCandless. Scorsese discusses the relationship he, Schrader and De Niro had with Bickle as a character, and how they never had to talk about it:

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442 Ibid., 92.
443 Berlins, 'What is it about Albert Camus' *The Outsider* that makes it such an enduring favourite with men?' in *The Guardian*, 12 April 2006, accessed 15 August 2014, www.guardian.co.uk.
444 Jardine and Watkins, 'The books that move men' in *The Guardian*, 6 April 2006, accessed 15 August 2014, www.theguardian.com.

> [Schrader] lived those feelings. *I* lived those feelings … I just… identified with him. We understood how he felt. He's an outsider, a loner, a loser to a certain extent… and there was something that touched a chord in me that I felt I could express that …. [De Niro] understood it too. We never really verbalized it.

Schrader reiterates this sentiment, also noting that it did not need to be discussed: "I don't remember having any real kind of script conversations with either De Niro or Scorsese. I mean, they knew exactly who this guy was. They knew it. They knew this… thing."

And perhaps it is "this thing," this indefinable chord that is struck, that so captivates readers and audiences. It is the mystery that draws us in to identify with our first person narrators, embroiling the viewer into a sort of complicity. Gretchen Schwartz, with reference to an article for the *British Journal of Criminology* by Richard Sparks, explains that the Mulvean pleasure in identification through the gaze "is not always an association with the heroic and the powerful…."

> Sometimes, the leading male character is exceedingly violent, a man existing slightly or firmly outside of the established law. The variety of leading masculine depictions includes males who are too "primordial," and thus alone, away from conventions that shape society.[445]

Isolated, anomic, sociopathic, Travis Bickle is exceedingly violent, and certainly alone – separated from the conventions and moral codes that shape society. Schwartz asks the question: "Do moviegoers relate to De Niro?" and goes on to question whether audiences would actually want to see him playing roles where he explicitly "[champions] western ideologies," or "[settles] down with a family in the suburbs." She posits that it is in fact the "perceived distance" the audience feels that "allows viewers to evaluate his position as

[445] Schwartz, "'You Talkin' to Me?'" (2008), 446.

subject and agent of both fidelity to and subversion of ideologies."[446] It seems that, like Betsy we are at once beguiled and repulsed by him. And it is precisely this combination of identification and revulsion, fidelity and subversion, that has made Travis Bickle one of cinema's most vital and enduring male protagonists.

In conclusion, the essential components of my analysis of Travis Bickle can be summarised as an analysis showing how the anomic screen male relates to society, himself, alienation, death, and the audience observing it all. Through this study I have found that Bickle's loneliness drives him towards violence and death, and places him in conflict – both with a society from which he is estranged and with himself. I believe that this latter conflict, this internal division, is what causes him to seem less in control, less assertive, less, indeed, like a traditional protagonist with all the tenets of hegemonic American masculinity. He is neither the saviour, nor the boyfriend. As a man who is outside, observing from places of solitude, he exists on the brink of sudden ferocity, but does not possess the focus and force of purpose required to be either a traditional hero or villain. Instead, he occupies a nebulous middle-ground, the lonely, liminal position of the anti-hero, the outsider. And while he is unable to conform to the full gamut of hegemonic American masculinity, he nevertheless surpasses the requirements in certain areas: he overcomes passivity by exploding in violent action, and carving out a new version of himself – a more heroic, more masculine self.

[446] Ibid., 455.

Conclusion

"We lived in utter loneliness, neither here nor there. Kit said that solitude was a better word, 'cause it meant more exactly what I wanted to say. Whatever the expression, I told him we couldn't go on living this way." — Holly, *Badlands*

For as long as society has existed, there have been men who sought to escape it. Urged by a lust for adventure, escape or discovery, love for god or nature, longing for silence or the large spans of time required for contemplation and composition, men have ventured away from the village or the city. For whatever reason, they made a conscious decision to leave – some for a few months, others for years, even the rest of their lives. They deserted the supposed comfort and security of society in order to pursue an uncommon, and yet, one of the oldest, most enduring pleasures in human history: solitude.

This desire for solitude is inextricably bound up with man's insatiable hunt for space – for some portion of earth to call his own, to stake a claim, plant a flag, or scrawl his name. These actions prove his ability to both possess and to survive independently, because personal ownership means he has beaten every other man who wanted that possession, and survival means that he has beaten death. Solitude and independence, in this way, is a victory for the man who pursues them. He has competed against every man who sought his company, anyone who tried to impose some responsibility or exact some time, and he has won. His prize is the masculine capital he gains, a sense of identity and self-worth. Ironically, this masculine identity can only be awarded by the society he has renounced – imparted by an audience of male peers watching and assessing from afar.

Alienation, however, is that peculiar solitude which is inflicted rather than pursued, and it creates a very different experience of solitude for the individual. As I mentioned before, in my study of Travis Bickle, the roles are reversed: he has not pursued solitude, it has pursued him – all his life, loneliness has followed him. *Taxi Driver*, in a sense, is a film about it finally catching up to him. We see what solitude does to a man who fears it, and also what that man will do to the society that seems to inflict it. Because, as Berdyaev points out, solitude is essentially a social phenomenon – it can only be experienced in relation to society. And the closer the loner is to society, the more acutely negative his experience of solitude is likely to be. Isolation within society can even be torturous, as in the institutionalised punishment of solitary confinement and, to some extent, the alienated man, who longs to be "a part of the main." While the lonely man might use this view of being hunted by solitude to rationalise his isolation as 'not his fault,' he must then also relinquish his sense of masculine self-determination and take up the role of the victim. In the case of Bickle, this works as a kind of spring mechanism – he recoils from society only to launch himself back into it in an act of devastating violence, which reclaims his masculinity and makes him a hero.

Whether his solitude is a choice or a penance, the outsider represents a powerful figure of American masculinity that is at once distinct from, and defined by, mainstream values. Like Jeffords's 'debrided' American male, the normative concept of masculinity is paraded as something essential and unchanging, rather than a "construction of masculinity as representation."[447] In this way, the pervasive power of hegemonic American masculinity is at work even in the marginal masculinities of the nonconformist or anomic men who reject mainstream social values.

[447] Jeffords, 'Debriding Vietnam' (1988), 540.

Christopher McCandless and Travis Bickle, though seemingly at opposite ends of both the solitude and the reality spectrums, display many of the same inherent tendencies of marginal masculinity in America. John Hinckley stands as a sort of bridge across the apparent divide in the reality spectrum. He is the product of the realities and fictions that influenced him, an estranged male who eventually burst into violence, and lives on in public discourse – evidence of the cyclical nature of life imitating art imitating life. And both of these mutually influential realms of history and cinema are permeated by the mainstream values of the society that created them. In the case of McCandless, Bickle, and the focus of this thesis, the values are those of hegemonic American masculinity – potently represented on screen by the Hollywood film industry to both reflect and inform the society that funds it.

McCandless is the outsider looking inwards in search of a Thoreauvian 'wilderness' experience away from society, while Bickle is trapped on the inside of society, looking out at the throngs of people moving through the city streets by night. But both cultivate their own solitude – whether consciously as McCandless, or pathologically in the case of Bickle's compulsive self-destructive anti-social behaviour. Both men hurtle towards the inevitable ultimate solitude of death. McCandless taunts it through his reckless adventures, while Bickle is attracted by its apparent offer of peace – the kind of acceptance he could not find in life. And though this inevitability may seem to darken their respective narratives, it lends them both a sense of final purpose, which Camus incorporates into one of the more hopeful elements of Absurdism: "A fate is not a punishment."[448]

[448] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1981), 71.

In their death they achieve a kind of heroic, or even legendary, status – though both are controversial. McCandless is mocked and praised by the public to almost equal degrees, while Bickle's minor celebrity in the final twist of the film is undermined by what the audience has seen of him through the rest of the film. Both men are revered and reviled by the society they have been separated from. The very fact that they do not conform to the normative values of hegemonic American masculinity accords them an almost transcendent hypermasculinity, as their efforts are focused on only a few of the requirements, while the mass of men who attempt to adhere to all the tenets are doomed to fail more generally.

Both of these iconic American outsiders are charged by the dramatic tension of an inherent paradox of the 'ideal' male. He is as much at conflict with the world around him as he is with himself. The reverence and revulsion expressed by society is reflected in his own view of himself – a mix of narcissism and self-loathing. I have argued in this thesis that the outsider is defined by a series of paradoxes because, according to American mainstream standards, the outsider is the man who is not a man. And yet he is every man.

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