



Author Jon Krakauer at a speaking engagement, October 2009.  
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# From Literary Journalism to Transmedia Worlds: *Into the Wild* and Beyond

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**Abstract:** This study explores literary journalism's potential to create transmedia worlds through a salient example—the narrative world that has slowly grown around the news story recounting the discovery of Christopher McCandless's body in a remote Alaskan camp in 1992. The study describes how the news story has grown into a larger and richer storyworld scattered across different media, and details how readers have found and created various opportunities to engage in this storyworld. The expansion from news story to transmedia world, the study argues, was made possible because author Jon Krakauer became interested in the story and turned it into two pieces of literary journalism: “Death of an Innocent,” a 1993 article published in *Outside* magazine and, more importantly, his 1996 book, *Into the Wild*. Those pieces of literary journalism provided full, vivid, and emotionally charged accounts of McCandless's story with strong impact and resonance. Other authors expanded Krakauer's narrative into a larger and richer world, dispersed across different media, thereby engaging larger audiences in the storyworld. The study concludes with a discussion of a few other examples of literary journalism that to varying degrees expand into transmedia worlds and argues for literary journalists to consider transmedia storytelling when conceiving their narratives.

**Keywords:** transmedia – literary journalism – storyworld – audience participation – Jon Krakauer

On September 13, 1992, numerous U.S. media outlets reported the discovery of an unidentified hiker's body in a remote area of Alaska. Almost three decades later, many people throughout the world still know the young hiker's name, Christopher McCandless, and his story, which became well known through a book and then film, both entitled *Into the Wild*.<sup>1</sup> Fans and detractors have commented on the story in letters to the book author, columns in the media, and posts on social networks or fan websites. "Pilgrims" have embarked on the same journey to Alaska,<sup>2</sup> and the young hiker's fate has inspired numerous articles, books, films, and television shows.

This essay details how that first news story slowly expanded into what can be considered a *transmedia world*—and highlights the role that literary journalism played in that expansion. Over the decades there have been multiple examples of cross-media literary journalism, with magazine pieces or newspaper series turned into books, documentaries, or films. What distinguishes *Into the Wild* from those—and argues for its being considered transmedia—is the extent and richness of the *storyworld* created around the core story, as well as the numerous and diverse ways that have emerged for readers and viewers to *participate* in this storyworld.

The essay first presents the notion of transmedia storytelling and its adaptation to journalism. It then relates how a large and engaging storyworld has grown around the story of McCandless and discusses why the storyworld can be considered transmedia. The conclusion briefly examines a few other examples of journalistic narratives that have circulated across media—from *Hiroshima* to *Serial*—in order to reflect on the relationship between literary journalism and transmedia storytelling.

### **Transmedia Storytelling, World-Building, and Audience Participation**

Since Marsha Kinder first introduced the term *transmedia* into the field of media studies in 1991,<sup>3</sup> the notion has been widely debated.<sup>4</sup> The most widely used definition remains Henry Jenkins's, who says transmedia storytelling can be understood as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes [its] own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story."<sup>5</sup> As such, transmedia storytelling provides "a new model for co-creation—rather than adaptation—of content that crosses media."<sup>6</sup> Transmedia storytelling "do[es] not involve the telling of the same events on different platforms; [it] involve[s] the telling of *new* events from the *same* storyworld."<sup>7</sup>

The notion of *storyworld* has recently gained traction in narratology, as the dynamic model of the world projected by a narrative text—be it fictional

or factual.<sup>8</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan describes a storyworld as being composed of:

*Existents*: the characters of the story and the objects that have special significance for the plot . . . .

*Setting*: a space within which the existents are located . . . .

*Physical laws*: principles that determine what kind of events can and cannot happen in a given story . . . .

*Social rules and values*: principles that determine the obligations of characters . . . .

*Events*: the causes of the changes of state that happen in the time span framed by the narrative . . . .

*Mental events*: the character's reactions to perceived or actual states of affairs . . . .<sup>9</sup>

Whereas every narrative text normally projects its own storyworld, in transmedia storytelling, the storyworld refers to “the representation of a world [that] is distributed among many different texts of different media.”<sup>10</sup> Ryan thus argues that the term transmedia *world-building* would be more appropriate than transmedia *storytelling*.<sup>11</sup> World-building is also central to Jenkins's conception of transmedia, and he suggests that there are two main logics in transmedia world-building. Most of the time, authors opt for a logic of *continuity*, proposing different narrative segments that are coherent with each other in order to increase the plausibility of the world. However, a transmedia world may sometimes offer alternative versions of a story or character, thus applying a logic of *multiplicity*.<sup>12</sup> Although Jenkins probably draws this distinction for the field of fictional narratives—as he usually does—it appears particularly interesting for nonfictional narratives, for which conflicting versions often may coexist, depending on who tells the story.<sup>13</sup>

Because transmedia storytelling creates storyworlds *across media*, the phenomenon appears to be closely connected to the current context of media convergence, that is, “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.”<sup>14</sup> In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins convincingly argues that convergence should not be primarily seen as a technological shift, but as a cultural transformation, toward “participatory culture,” in which, by his definition, “fans and consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content.”<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, in transmedia storytelling, the construction of a larger storyworld ultimately

aims at “intensifying audience engagement.”<sup>16</sup> Carlos Scolari, Paolo Bertetti, and Matthew Freeman suggest the following equation: “*Media Industry (canon) + Collaborative Culture (fandom) = Transmedia Storytelling.*”<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the circulation of content, scholars have mostly focused on *spreadability* as “the potential—both technical and cultural—for audiences to share content for their own purposes, sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes.”<sup>18</sup> Yet Jason Mittel suggests that audiences also engage in *drillable* texts, which encourage them to “dig deeper” into the storyworld.<sup>19</sup> Noting that drillable texts become highly spreadable for fan audiences, Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green consider both spreadability and drillability as valid models for engaging audiences in transmedia storytelling.<sup>20</sup>

Audiences also engage with the storyworld in more active ways, by creating their own contributions to it—activating what Jenkins describes as opportunities for *performance*.<sup>21</sup> Such participation can be foreseen or encouraged by the authors, or not. Participation may result in the creation of a new segment, such as in fanfiction writing, or not—for example, when reenacting scenes of the story. Audience performance can sometimes even become an integral part of the storyworld and affect the unfolding of future stories.

### Transmedia and Journalism

Though first conceived as a commercial strategy of media conglomerates in the fields of fiction and entertainment, “transmediality has since grown into a distinct subfield of scholarly investigation . . .”<sup>22</sup> The notion of transmedia has quickly been adapted to journalism, among other fields. Transmedia journalism is then “characterized by the involvement of (1) multiple media platforms, (2) content expansion, and (3) audience engagement.”<sup>23</sup> This definition highlights the same key features as the previous discussion of transmedia storytelling: the dispersion of non-repetitive yet highly cohesive content across different media—that is, building a storyworld—and the participation of audiences.

In their effort to explore and outline *Transmedia Archaeology*, Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman claim that “[j]ournalists have been producing transmedia storytelling for years . . .”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, news stories have long been covered in different media<sup>25</sup> and the public has long had opportunities to engage with such stories, first through letters or phone calls to the newsrooms, then through comments, forums, emails, and so on. Yet, as Renira Gambarato and Lorena Tárca note, “thus far, the majority of the content spread across different media platforms is simply repurposed.”<sup>26</sup> While a large number of news media, now more than ever, tailor their content for different platforms,

true transmedia projects, in which each platform offers a form of content expansion—not repetition or slight adaptation—are recent and remain few in number in journalism.<sup>27</sup>

Most of the research on transmedia journalism has focused on such projects. Gambarato and Tárca argue that “[a]lthough every newsworthy event has the potential to be transmediatic, transmedia journalism is optimized when it becomes a proactive planned process with journalists assuming responsibility for building a storyworld in which the prosumers . . . , consumers who are also media producers, are engaged.”<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, transmedia journalism would be especially well-suited for digital longform journalism as they both “embrace new technologies (mobile, locative media, for instance) and devices (smartphones, tablets, etc.) to tell compelling stories able to reach a diversified public. The audience engagement is a central point for both to involve the audience as collaborators and create a more valuable experience.”<sup>29</sup>

This study explores further the connection between transmedia and longform journalism, arguing that forms of transmedia longform journalism predate these recent digital projects, although such forms were not designed as unified and coordinated experiences. As Ryan notes, even in the field of fiction, “[t]ransmedia storytelling is supposed to be a top-down operation that coordinates various media for a global experience, but in practice it usually starts bottom-up, by exploiting the commercial success of a narrative originally conceived as autonomous. . . .”<sup>30</sup> Following Ryan, this study suggests that the absence of planning and coordination does not disqualify a set of narrative segments from being considered as a transmedia venture.

Moreover, the study adheres to Freeman and Gambarato’s argument that “[r]evising, refining, and clarifying our understanding of what does—and therefore what does not—constitute a form of “transmedia” is indeed crucial, both to the future of this avenue of study but more importantly to our collective abilities to make sense of how, why, and when media content flows, expands, and moves across multiple media platforms in particular ways, for particular reasons, and with particular effects.”<sup>31</sup> The study intends to contribute to this endeavor within the field of journalism by exploring a form of transmedia journalism that was not “the result of ‘carefully orchestrated company strategies’,”<sup>32</sup> but sprang from a largely unintended and uncoordinated expansion. Through the example of *Into the Wild*, this analysis will show how a simple news story became a piece of literary journalism that then grew into a large and highly engaging storyworld spreading across different media. It will then reflect on the relationship between literary journalism and transmedia.

### Into the Wild Obsession

ANCHORAGE, SEPT. 12—Last Sunday a young hiker, stranded by an injury, was found dead at a remote camp in the Alaskan interior. No one is yet certain who he was. But his diary and two notes found at the camp tell a wrenching story of his desperate and progressively futile efforts to survive.<sup>33</sup>

The story that is now known as *Into the Wild* started with this 1992 article in the *New York Times*, headlined “Dying in the Wild, a Hiker Recorded the Terror.” Many U.S. media outlets covered that story until a second and final *Times* article entitled, “Hiker Identified by Self-Portrait,” was published a week later, on September 20. The article reported that the young man was in fact “Christopher J. McCandless, a 24-year-old from Annandale, Va., who graduated from Emory University in Atlanta.”<sup>34</sup> Yet this revelation was far from being the end of McCandless’s story. An editor from *Outside* magazine who had read the first *Times* piece became so intrigued by the tragic details of the young hiker’s story that he asked writer Jon Krakauer to investigate it further and write a long piece for the magazine. Krakauer was busy with other writing but the story resonated with him “on a deeply personal level,” and he decided to accept the new assignment.<sup>35</sup>

The resulting magazine piece, “Death of an Innocent,” published in the January 1993 issue of *Outside*,<sup>36</sup> mixes deep and thorough reporting with Krakauer’s personal experience in order to deliver a gripping and vivid re-creation of the life and journey of McCandless while also reflecting on the human relationship to wilderness. The text thus reveals all the characteristics of literary journalism as defined by Norman Sims—“immersion reporting, complicated structures, character development, symbolism, voice, a focus on ordinary people . . . and accuracy.”<sup>37</sup> Krakauer concluded, at the end of the piece:

One of his last acts was to take a photograph of himself, standing near the bus under the high Alaskan sky, one hand holding his final note toward the camera lens, the other raised in a brave, beatific farewell. He is smiling in the photo, and there is no mistaking the look in his eyes: Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God.<sup>38</sup>

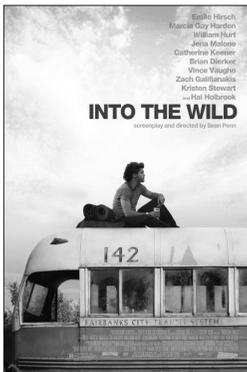
Krakauer, however, could not let the story go: “I was haunted by the particulars of the boy’s starvation and by vague, unsettling parallels between events in his life and those in my own.”<sup>39</sup> He resumed his reporting and investigation, retracing McCandless’s life step by step. The outcome of this



hard work was a book-length manuscript published in 1996 entitled *Into the Wild* that qualifies as literary journalism according to Sims's definition. The book is not only a longer and more detailed account of McCandless's story, it also includes more people McCandless met along the way and longer flashbacks to his childhood and previous travels. Based on his additional investigation, Krakauer suggested another cause of death. He also developed comparisons with his own younger self and with other adventurers who sought the wild that were only briefly outlined in the magazine piece. As he explains in the author's note:

In trying to understand McCandless, I inevitably came to reflect on other, larger subjects as well: the grip wilderness has on the American imagination, the allure high-risk activities hold for young men of a certain mind, the complicated, highly charged bond that exists between fathers and sons.<sup>40</sup>

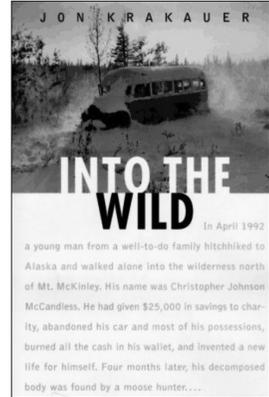
The book quickly became a bestseller, with several million copies purchased in the United States alone. Among the first readers was actor and director Sean Penn. He immediately knew he wanted to turn it into a film, although because of concerns from McCandless's family it took more than



ten years to complete the project. Also titled *Into the Wild*, the film was released in 2007. Its revenue exceeded \$18 million in U.S. theaters, and \$56 million worldwide.<sup>41</sup> Although the film is based on the book, and Krakauer, as well as other characters from the book, acted as consultants on the set, the film reflects Penn's own take on McCandless's story. Adapting written words to the screen, Penn had no choice but to fictionalize the story in some measure. But he went further than what was strictly needed to fill the gaps in Krakauer's text with images and sounds.

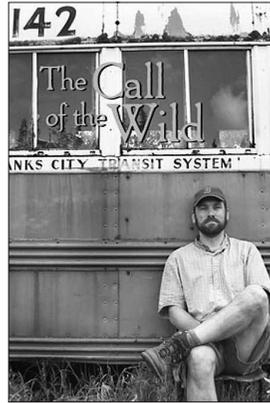
Compared to the book, the film features important changes regarding structure and voice—sometimes it seems McCandless is telling or commenting on his own story, sometimes it is his sister Carine—and, most notably, the ending of the story.

In the book, as in the magazine article, McCandless dies alone in the abandoned bus where he has established his camp, “serene as a monk gone to God.” In the film, McCandless, dying in the bus, smiles as he looks up at the sky and imagines himself running back to his parents; in voice-over, he asks: “What if I



were smiling and running into your arms, would you see then what I see now?” In her memoirs, Carine, who acted as a consultant for the film, recounts how this scene is Penn’s compromise between the idea of forgiveness that he wanted to convey and her fear of betraying her brother’s actual experience.<sup>42</sup>

That same year, 2007, a few months after Penn’s film was released, another film was devoted to McCandless’s story—*The Call of the Wild*, an independent documentary made by Ron Lamothe, yet another man deeply touched by the story. It offers a rather different take on the story, openly disagreeing with some elements of Krakauer’s account—based on newly uncovered evidence, such as McCandless’s backpack and wallet—and suggesting a different hypothesis about the cause of McCandless’s death. Yet, according to Lamothe, “despite some of the unpleasant truths that are uncovered in the film, and some of the controversies engaged, or negative opinions given voice for the first time, this film is in the end a celebration of the spirit of Chris McCandless, and a reflection on his legacy.”<sup>43</sup>

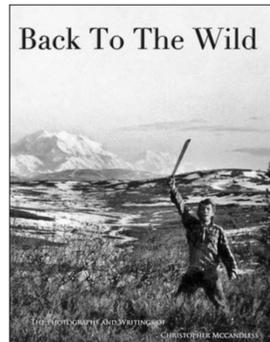


In 2008, Discovery Channel launched a new reality television series entitled *The Alaska Experiment*, which in 2009 was opportunely renamed *Out of the Wild: The Alaska Experiment*. In both seasons, participants were dropped off in the Alaskan backcountry during the middle of winter, where they would have to survive on their own for several weeks.<sup>44</sup>



Then, in 2011, McCandless’s parents edited a book and a DVD, both entitled *Back to the Wild*, featuring the photographs their son took during his trip, as well as some of his correspondence. In a note at the beginning of the book, Krakauer presents these as “the raw material that enabled [him] to write *Into the Wild*.”<sup>45</sup> This raw material, however, is framed by introductory texts and captions written by a team of authors, including McCandless’s parents, in order to “give each photograph a voice.”<sup>46</sup>

It was then the turn of Carine, McCandless’s sister, to publish a book in 2014. Her memoirs, *The Wild Truth*, recount their childhood as well as her life since her brother’s death. The memoirs focus largely on *The Secrets That Drove Chris McCandless*



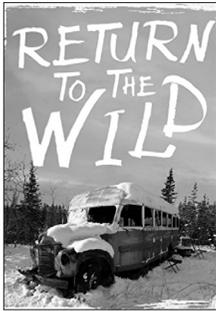
*into the Wild*, as the book subtitle puts it, detailing the climate of lies and violence in which they both grew up. Krakauer reveals in the foreword that Carine had told him all about their childhood when he was writing *Into the Wild*, but she had made him promise to keep it “off the record.”<sup>47</sup>

I was confident I could provide enough indirect clues for readers to understand that, to no small degree, Chris’s seemingly inexplicable behavior during the final years of his life was in fact explained by the volatile dynamics of the McCandless family while he was growing up.

Many readers did understand this, as it turned out. But many did not. . . .

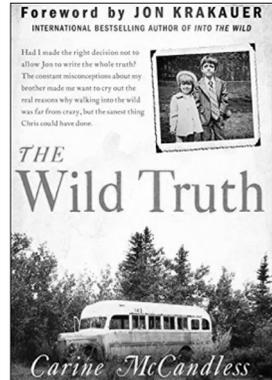
. . . Two decades after her brother’s death, she [Carine] decided it was time to tell Chris’s entire story, plainly and directly. . . .<sup>48</sup>

Closely following the book’s release, U.S. public television broadcast *Return to the Wild: The Chris McCandless Story*, a documentary retracing both McCandless’s story and the new revelations in his sister’s memoirs.<sup>49</sup>

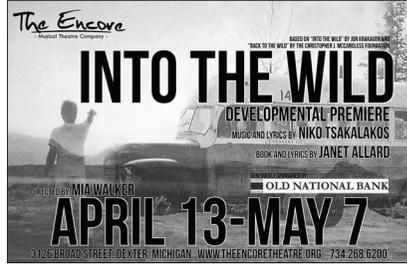


Meanwhile, Krakauer remained obsessed with the young man’s fate. His continuing investigation into causes of death resulted in the publication of two *New Yorker* articles—“How Chris McCandless Died,” published in September 2013, and “How Chris McCandless Died: An Update,” published in February 2015, both on the magazine’s Page-Turner website.<sup>50</sup>

Krakauer was not the only one who could not let the story of McCandless go. Every new article, book, or film released also offered an opportunity for more comments in the media. While most of these comments seemed to be reviews or restatements of the main facts, a few raised divergent voices, some even vehemently challenging Krakauer’s account. The most vocal critic appears to have been Craig Medred, a columnist for the *Alaska Dispatch News*. Medred wrote, among other pieces, “Krakauer Goes Further ‘Into the Wild’ over McCandless Starving to Death in Alaska,” in September 2013, and “The Fiction That Is Jon Krakauer’s ‘Into the Wild,’” in January 2015.<sup>51</sup> Medred’s main thesis is that “Krakauer fixated on the ‘aesthetic voyager’ part and started shaping a book around it. McCandless was transformed from a foolish, dead cheechako [inexperienced beginner in mining territory] into a heroic figure who died tragically, as heroes must.”<sup>52</sup>



Despite the criticism, new productions based on *Into the Wild* kept popping up all over the world. To give just a few examples: In 2015, Tom Waes, a Dutch-speaking Belgian on-air presenter, inspired by the book, decided to devote a television show to Alaska.<sup>53</sup> In 2016, the *Diary of Chris McCandless* was posted online, as if McCandless were telling his own story in thirty-three blog entries.<sup>54</sup> The blog allegedly tells McCandless's story in the first person, through thirty-three entries loosely inspired by McCandless's actual diary—but, in reality, entirely rewritten and containing many fictionalized additions. In 2017, a musical entitled *Into the Wild* was premiered at a Michigan theater.<sup>55</sup> In 2018, a British novel, Abi Andrews's *The Word for Woman Is Wilderness*, came out, in which a young girl decides to go to Alaska after watching Penn's film.<sup>56</sup>



Fans remain active, too. Beyond the comments generated by articles in the media—where one can also find critics—people have shared their thoughts on the internet: stories of transformation after reading or watching *Into the Wild* and pictures of their tattoos or fan art inspired by McCandless's story. One of Krakauer's later articles on the causes of McCandless's death, "How Chris McCandless Died,"<sup>57</sup> was prompted by an essay Krakauer read on a fan site.<sup>58</sup> On social networks, voracious fans as recently as 2018 were exchanging references of books to read after *Into the Wild*—such as *A Walk in the Woods*, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, *Wild*,<sup>59</sup> but also the works of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Edward Abbey, and others. Fans could also find on different websites, shells for mobile phones, cushions, bags, or t-shirts, all stamped Into the Wild and for sale.

Each year, like the Belgian TV presenter and the English fictional character, dozens of readers and viewers are drawn to Alaska. Many of them even go on a pilgrimage in McCandless's footsteps to the abandoned bus in which his body was found—despite the danger of such a trek. Each year, several have to be rescued as they get lost or injured on the way. In 2010 and 2019, two women died on their way to the bus while they were trying to cross a river.<sup>60</sup> But this has not deterred pilgrims who kept coming to the source—and become part of the story themselves, as they get media coverage.<sup>61</sup> Eventually, in order to avoid other incidents, Alaskan state officials decided in June 2020 to remove the bus and transport to a "secure site."<sup>62</sup>

### The Features of Transmedia at Play

The storyworld that grew around the story of McCandless appears larger and richer than Krakauer's original article, or even his book. Penn's film provides a view of the places and landscapes McCandless visited. Lamothe's documentary gives the faces of some of the people he met, as well as a different version of the story. The book and DVD edited by McCandless's parents include McCandless's face and his photographs, as well as his own words. Carine McCandless's book broadens the scope of his story while also introducing and developing many minor characters. Each new narrative segment thus contributes to transmedia world-building—the expansion of the storyworld across different media. While all these narrative segments do not tell strictly distinct episodes, the expansion is perceptible even through the titles: *Into the Wild*, *Back to the Wild*, *The Wild Truth*, *Return to the Wild*, and so on. The storyworld, moreover, expands beyond the realms of facts and journalism into the realms of fiction, as with Penn's film, *Into the Wild*, or Andrews's British novel, *The Word for Woman Is Wilderness*; and entertainment, as with Discovery Channel's reality television series, *Out of the Wild*; and the Michigan theater's musical, *Into the Wild*. Such expansion across the divide between fiction and nonfiction suggests that neither transmedia storytelling in Jenkins's sense—that is, as the planned dispersion of various elements of a fiction across different media—nor transmedia journalism as it has been studied so far, provides a fully adequate framework to investigate complex transmedia forms such as *Into the Wild*—thus calling for a study of transmedia phenomena, beyond demarcated fields, in a transdisciplinary approach.

A large part of the storyworld expansion follows a logic of continuity with regard to the core narrative as it was told by Krakauer, first in the 1993 *Outside* piece, "Death of an Innocent," then in his book, *Into the Wild*. Krakauer was involved in producing Penn's film, the book edited by McCandless's parents, and McCandless's sister Carine's memoirs. Yet another part of the storyworld is built through a logic of multiplicity, which reveals each author's view of McCandless. This second logic appears most clearly in the articles written by Medred, who considers McCandless a "foolish, dead cheechako," accusing Krakauer of turning him into a hero. Continuity and multiplicity can also interact in complex ways. In their books, McCandless's parents and Carine present themselves as continuing Krakauer's story—and both books feature a note from Krakauer himself reinforcing the continuity.<sup>63</sup> But the logic at work between the two books is multiplicity: while McCandless's parents write that one can only speculate on the reasons that led their son into the wild, Carine's goal is precisely to shed light on those reasons and hold her parents accountable. Penn claimed to be "just a faithful adapter,"<sup>64</sup>

but offered a slightly different take on the story, as evidenced by the ending of the film, noted earlier. Even among Krakauer's various texts, which careful comparisons show to be coherent with each other, there is a form of multiplicity: each offers a different explanation for McCandless's death, thus creating slightly different stories that coexist in the larger storyworld.

It seems that these two logics of world-building coexist and combine in such complex ways because the storyworld of *Into the Wild* is neither a top-down venture nor a grass-roots endeavor. There is no *Into the Wild* franchise, which would be entitled to narrative control over the storyworld. Instead, the storyworld grew from the bottom up, "through a process of aggregation that adds ever new documents to the representation of a storyworld that has already achieved popularity, independently of any transmedia buildup."<sup>65</sup> Yet contrary to most bottom-up transmedia endeavors, these new documents were created not only by amateur-fans, they were also and mostly produced by different professionals and distributed by various mainstream media, which all reveal highly diverse relationships to Krakauer and his original work. This particular configuration also accounts for the coexistence in the storyworld of deeply personal works by passionate authors like Krakauer, or even Lamothe, and purely commercial undertakings such as the reality TV show, *Out of the Wild*, and all the items stamped Into the Wild that one can buy online.<sup>66</sup>

For audiences, the storyworld becomes more drillable with every new narrative segment. While *Outside* magazine readers had to wait several years to read the expanded version in book form, and another decade-plus to watch the film, fans can now access the original images of McCandless's journey, learn more about his childhood, and absorb conflicting perspectives on Krakauer's account. The elements of the storyworld have also become more spreadable. Although Krakauer's article and book were published before the age of social media, there are now Facebook pages, websites, and forums where readers can share other segments of the narrative world, some of which are created by other fans.

Segments of the narrative world created by fans constitute performances, in Jenkins's sense. Whether these new segments created by fans are personal essays, artwork, or even pictures of tattoos, they reveal how the narrative world of *Into the Wild* has made it into the lives of its readers. The highest degree of such performances happens with Krakauer's testing and then adopting a fan's theory on the causes of McCandless's death: an alternative version of the story, proposed by a fan, is validated by the primary author. Another kind of performance, also intense, consists of making one's life into the storyworld, as when fans turn themselves into pilgrims and make the journey to the bus in Alaska. Such pilgrimages attract media coverage that revives the

main story of *Into the Wild* and expands the storyworld as fans themselves become characters in this world.

Finally, by exchanging recommendations for books to read after *Into the Wild*, which can be seen as another form of performance, fans connect McCandless's story with other stories—that may be more or less similar. Fans are, in fact, continuing a movement that Krakauer himself initiated in his book, where he evokes the destiny of other adventurers—including himself—and creates an extensive network of references to great nature and outdoor writers, among them, Thoreau, Muir, and Jack London. It thus seems that both the primary author and the fans are exploring and questioning the boundaries of the storyworld around *Into the Wild*, as well as its relationship to other stories and other storyworlds that appear to be part of a broader cultural narrative about the human relationship with nature. Again, this invites a transdisciplinary investigation of transmedia phenomena that would be able to explore not only different storyworlds—both factual and fictional—but also the different kinds of relationships among these storyworlds.

As this analysis shows, the storyworld around McCandless cannot be considered as pure transmedia in Jenkins's sense—first because it was unplanned and uncoordinated, but also, and more fundamentally, because some part of it seems closer to cross-media.<sup>67</sup> It still qualifies as transmedia, however, because a rich storyworld is indeed built across different media and through the active participation of audiences. Consequently, the example of *Into the Wild* would call for a more complex definition of transmedia, which would take into account different modes of production as well as different degrees of content expansion.

### Literary Journalism and Transmedia Expansion

One feature of transmedia seems of peculiar importance in the expansion process of the storyworld around *Into the Wild*: spreadability. Even before the internet and social networks helped spread McCandless's story, *Into the Wild* inherently had a particularly strong propensity to spread, which seems to be at the origin of its narrative expansion. This propensity seems to stem from both the story itself and the narrative into which Krakauer turned it. McCandless's story appears to appeal deeply to certain individuals. Indeed, *Into the Wild* started with an editor from *Outside*, fascinated by a news report about McCandless, who asked Krakauer to investigate the story further. Then Krakauer himself became obsessed with the story and devoted not only a magazine piece, but also a whole book to it—and several other magazine pieces, years later.

Krakauer's first two pieces appear pivotal in the expansion of the story into a larger transmedia world—especially the book, which reached a much

larger audience. By providing a full account of McCandless's story, these two pieces of literary journalism constituted the narrative core that was necessary for a larger storyworld to grow. Moreover, as vividly rendered and emotionally charged narratives, they had such strong impact and resonance that others—writers, filmmakers, witnesses, or even just fans—expanded them into a larger and richer world, dispersed across different media and engaging audiences.

Indeed, Penn decided to make a film about McCandless after reading the book.<sup>68</sup> As did Lamothe. McCandless's parents started their DVD and book project after witnessing “a steadily growing, international interest in Chris' story guided by Jon Krakauer's book (1996) and Sean Penn's film (2007).”<sup>69</sup> Carine, troubled by the “mistaken assumptions” of some readers of *Into the Wild*, finally decided to tell explicitly what she had asked Krakauer to keep “off the record.”<sup>70</sup> The first pilgrims trekked to the abandoned bus in Alaska before Penn's film was released—though the number of pilgrims increased after 2007.<sup>71</sup> Even critics, such as Lamothe and Medred, reacted mainly to the book.

Nevertheless, Krakauer's version endured, despite all the challenges raised against it. What allowed Krakauer's narrative to both expand and survive its expansion—the criticisms, the alternative versions, but also the commercial hijacking—is the hallmark of literary journalists, their ability to recognize powerful stories and to tell these in such a way as to make them even more powerful. While *Into the Wild* appears as a particularly striking example of literary journalism's capacity to create rich and engaging storyworlds across media, it is not the only one.

An early example, although closer to cross-media than transmedia per se, could be John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. First published as a magazine piece in the *New Yorker*, in August 1946, just over a year after an atomic bomb had been dropped on the city of Hiroshima, the story was read on the radio and reprinted in newspapers and magazines, and then turned into a book.<sup>72</sup> It was also widely discussed in other media and complemented, decades later, by Hersey himself in “Hiroshima: The Aftermath”<sup>73</sup>—both of which can be considered forms of expansion across media. Although hard to measure in any objective way, Yavenditti describes Hersey's *Hiroshima* as having had a huge impact on the U.S. public and the debate about the atomic bomb<sup>74</sup>—thus revealing strong audience engagement.

Another example might be *Black Hawk Down*, about the battle in Mogadishu<sup>75</sup>—although, again, the storyworld beyond the core narrative appears somewhat limited. Written by Mark Bowden, the story was first printed as a news series in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1997, and published on the

newspaper's website with multimedia extensions such as video, audio clips, maps, links to other online resources, but also question-and-answer sessions with the author.<sup>76</sup> In 1999, the series was adapted as a book, also entitled *Black Hawk Down*, and a companion documentary, *Somalia: Good Intentions, Deadly Results*.<sup>77</sup> Two years later, Ridley Scott adapted Bowden's story into a Hollywood film, which raised controversies about its depiction of the facts, thus reviving media coverage about the original story.<sup>78</sup>

The first season of the *Serial* podcast appears as a more recent and more well-developed example.<sup>79</sup> In that first season, released in 2014, host Sarah Koenig reopened an old case, the murder of teenager Hae Min Lee in 1999, for which Hae Min Lee's ex-boyfriend, Adnan Syed, was convicted in 2000. In addition to the podcast itself, the *Serial* website also featured multimedia material—images of pieces of evidence, maps, and charts—related to the case. While the twelve-episode series ended without any clear conclusion about Syed's guilt, it revealed new evidence and prompted strong interest in the case—or, in other words, strong audience engagement. Various media took up the investigation, sharing hypotheses and clues online. So did an impressive number of listeners.<sup>80</sup>

Rabia Chaudry, the lawyer and friend of Syed who first contacted Koenig about Syed's story, created *Undisclosed*,<sup>81</sup> her own podcast about wrongful convictions, which started by investigating the case. She also wrote a book entitled *Adnan's Story: The Search for Truth and Justice after Serial*,<sup>82</sup> in which she claims to present new evidence but also to share Syed's life in prison. A key witness in the case, Asia McClain Chapman, published a book as well, *Confessions of a Serial Alibi*,<sup>83</sup> explaining the part she played and telling her own story. A one-hour documentary produced by Investigation Discovery and a four-hour documentary produced by HBO were also devoted to the case and the aftermath of *Serial* on the case.<sup>84</sup> In March 2019, when Syed received a new hearing about the evidence revealed by and after *Serial*, Koenig herself went back to the case with three new episodes of the podcast.<sup>85</sup> All those narrative segments contributed to build a larger storyworld across different media.

Moreover, like *Into the Wild*, *Serial* became famous not only because of the case it dealt with, but also because of the way Koenig recounted the case and her own investigation. In fact, the distinctive style of the podcast gave rise to several parodies—on the video website *Funny or Die* and in Netflix mockumentary *American Vandal*, among others.<sup>86</sup> Indirectly, these connected Syed's story to other, fictional stories—in a manner somewhat similar to the way the intertextual references of Krakauer and *Into the Wild* readers connected McCandless's story to stories written by Thoreau and London. Syed's story was

also indirectly related to two other seasons of *Serial*. Season two focused on the case of protagonist Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, a soldier charged with desertion after being kept as a prisoner for five years by the Taliban, while season three focused on the entire U.S. justice system.<sup>87</sup>

These are just a few examples of literary journalism pieces for which the stories were enriched by extensions on other media, thus creating larger storyworlds in which their audiences could engage and participate. While some of these extensions contain comparatively little new narrative information, and most of them were not the result of planned and coordinated efforts, the key features of transmedia storytelling are indeed at play in the expansion of these stories—to varying degrees. These few examples thus reveal the capacity of literary journalism to create transmedia worlds. This capacity builds on both the kind of complex human stories literary journalism tells and the way it tells them—through complete and highly experiential narratives that also convey a larger symbolic dimension.

As transmedia storytelling becomes more *en vogue* in media industries, this capacity could, in future, be more fully drawn out if literary journalists were to conceive their pieces as the core of a transmedia world that they could build—or at least plan—themselves. Such larger transmedia worlds might help literary journalists reach a larger audience, engage this larger audience more fully, and thus they might be more likely to take action as citizens, and help avoid the purely economic hijacking of their stories. This would require that literary journalists start thinking in terms of storyworld—of a network of intertwined stories, rather than focusing on a single plot—and reflecting on how, on what platform, and in what order each of these stories should be told, released, and connected to the others. Literary journalists should also consider how to make the storyworld both spreadable and drillable for their audience and try to identify opportunities in the storyworld for different kinds of audience performances.

Developing transmedia literary journalism projects would also require new forms of collaboration within the newsroom, because most newspapers and magazines now present information on multiple platforms. But development also means collaborations with other mainstream media or new actors in the field. Netflix, for example, has shown an interest in stories told by literary journalists, as evidenced by the recent releases of *Unbelievable* and *Dirty John*.<sup>88</sup> Such collaborations should bring together the reporting and storytelling skills of literary journalists and the expertise of transmedia specialists in world-building and audience engagement.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Krakauer, *Into the Wild*; Penn, *Into the Wild*.
- <sup>2</sup> Holland, "Chasing Alexander Supertramp," para. 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games*, 1. See also Scolari, "Transmedia Is Dead," 69–92.
- <sup>4</sup> Some of these debates are outlined in Ryan, "Le transmedia storytelling comme pratique narrative," para. 1–34. For a more comprehensive view on the state of scholarly discussion around transmedia, see, for example, Freeman and Gambarato, *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*.
- <sup>5</sup> Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101," para. 2.
- <sup>6</sup> Hence the distinction between *cross-media*—or adaptation—and *transmedia*. Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling: Moving Characters," para. 5.
- <sup>7</sup> Evans, *Transmedia Television*, 27 (emphasis in original).
- <sup>8</sup> "Nonfictional stories are told as true of the real world, but they do not necessarily live up to this ideal. The storyteller can be lying, misinformed, or playing loosely with the facts. It is therefore necessary to distinguish the world as it is presented and shaped by a story from the world as it exists autonomously. The former is the storyworld, the latter the reference world." Ryan, "Story/Worlds/Media," 33.
- <sup>9</sup> Ryan, 34–36.
- <sup>10</sup> Ryan, 32.
- <sup>11</sup> Ryan, "Transmedia Storytelling," 4–5.
- <sup>12</sup> Jenkins, "La licorne origami contre-attaque," 11–28. For a presentation of Jenkins's principles of transmedia storytelling in English, and his elaboration on the concepts of continuity and multiplicity, see Jenkins, "The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling," subsection 2, "Continuity and Multiplicity"; and "Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: The Remaining Four Principles of Transmedia Storytelling," section 4, "Worldbuilding."
- <sup>13</sup> Indeed, the possibility of coexisting conflicting versions concurs with Ryan's argument for applying the notion of storyworld to factual narratives (See note 8). Ryan, "Story/Worlds/Media," 33.
- <sup>14</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Jenkins, 3, 290, s.v. "participatory culture." After stating his basic argument

on page 3, Jenkins weaves the argument throughout *Convergence Culture*. See also Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*.

<sup>16</sup> Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, 138.

<sup>17</sup> Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman, *Transmedia Archaeology*, 3 (emphasis in original).

<sup>18</sup> Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Jason Mittell, in Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, enhanced edition (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013), as quoted in Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, 135.

<sup>20</sup> Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 135–37; 198–228.

<sup>21</sup> Jenkins, “La licorne origami contre-attaque,” para. 52–55.

<sup>22</sup> Freeman and Gambarato, “Introduction: Transmedia Studies—Where Now?” 2.

<sup>23</sup> Gambarato and Tárca, “Transmedia Strategies in Journalism,” 1386.

<sup>24</sup> Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman, *Transmedia Archaeology*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> The circulation of news stories across various media is one of the defining characteristics of “media narratives” as defined by Lits, “Le récit médiatique,” 47–48, and Marion, “Narratologie médiatique et médiagenie des récits,” 70–71, among others.

<sup>26</sup> Gambarato and Tárca, “Transmedia Strategies in Journalism,” 1385.

<sup>27</sup> For examples, see Canavilhas, “Journalism in the Twenty-First Century: To Be or Not to Be Transmedia?” 1–14; Larrondo Ureta, “The Advance of Autonomous Public Televisions in the Convergent Scenario,” 107–20; Godulla and Wolf, “Future of Food: Transmedia Strategies of National Geographic,” 162–82; Moloney, “Future of Story: Transmedia Journalism and National Geographic’s *Future of Food Project*”; Gambarato and Tárca, “Transmedia Strategies in Journalism,” 1381–99.

<sup>28</sup> Gambarato and Tárca, 1385. Alvin Toffler introduces the term prosumers in his *Third Wave: The Classic Study of Tomorrow*, 267.

<sup>29</sup> Gambarato, “The Sochi Project: Slow Journalism within Transmedia Space,” 448–49. See also Eberwein, “A Question of Trust: Functions and Effects of Transmedia Journalism,” 15–30.

<sup>30</sup> Ryan, “Transmedia Storytelling,” 5.

<sup>31</sup> Freeman and Gambarato, “Introduction: Transmedia Studies—Where Now?” 2.

<sup>32</sup> Fast and Örnebring, “Transmedia World-Building,” 637, quoted in Gambarato, “Transmedia Journalism,” 92.

<sup>33</sup> “Dying in the Wild, a Hiker Recorded the Terror,” 31.

<sup>34</sup> “Hiker Identified by Self-Portrait,” 38.

<sup>35</sup> Krakauer, foreword to *The Wild Truth*, ix–x.

<sup>36</sup> Krakauer, “Death of an Innocent,” 92. Another magazine piece devoted to McCandless, “I Now Walk into the Wild,” was published the same month in the *New Yorker*. While it can also be considered literary journalism, it did not play the same part in the expansion of the story into a narrative world. Only Lamothe mentions the piece. See Chip Brown, “I Now Walk in the Wild,” *New Yorker*, February

8, 1993, 36f, cited in Lamothe, “The Call of the Wild: Back Story,” September 2007, [http://www.tifilms.com/wild/call\\_backstory.htm](http://www.tifilms.com/wild/call_backstory.htm), para. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Sims, *True Stories*, 6–7.

<sup>38</sup> Krakauer, “Death of an Innocent,” 92.

<sup>39</sup> Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, x.

<sup>40</sup> Krakauer, x.

<sup>41</sup> “Christopher McCandless, Whose Alaskan Odyssey Ended in Death”; IMDbPro, “Into the Wild.”

<sup>42</sup> Carine McCandless, *The Wild Truth*, 235–36.

<sup>43</sup> Lamothe, “The Call of the Wild,” para. 5.

<sup>44</sup> IMDb, “Out of the Wild: The Alaska Experiment.” A third season of the show, which went on the air in 2011, took place in Venezuela. IMDb, “Out of the Wild: Venezuela.”

<sup>45</sup> Christopher McCandless et al., *Back to the Wild*; see “A Note from Jon Krakauer.”

<sup>46</sup> Christopher McCandless et al., *Back to the Wild*; see Walt and Billie McCandless, “About This Book, Its Origin and Development.”

<sup>47</sup> Krakauer, foreword to *The Wild Truth*, xii.

<sup>48</sup> Krakauer, xiii.

<sup>49</sup> Condon and Prum, *Return to the Wild*.

<sup>50</sup> Krakauer, “How Chris McCandless Died”; Krakauer, “How Chris McCandless Died: An Update.”

<sup>51</sup> Medred, “Krakauer Goes Further ‘Into the Wild,’ ”; Medred, “The Fiction That Is Jon Krakauer’s ‘Into the Wild.’ ”

<sup>52</sup> Medred, “Krakauer Goes Further ‘Into the Wild,’ ” para. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Weis, “Alaska (Part 1),” Tom treedt in de voetsporen van Chris McCandless [Tom is following in the footsteps of Chris McCandless].

<sup>54</sup> “Diary of Chris McCandless: Dying to be Wild.”

<sup>55</sup> Tsakalagos and Allard, *Into the Wild*.

<sup>56</sup> Andrews, *The Word for Woman Is Wilderness*.

<sup>57</sup> Krakauer, “How Chris McCandless Died,” para. 7.

<sup>58</sup> Hamilton, “Theory on Chris McCandless’ Death.”

<sup>59</sup> Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods*; Ralston, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*; Strayed, *Wild*.

<sup>60</sup> Associated Press, “‘Into the Wild’ Pilgrimages Increase in Alaska”; Associated Press, “Into the Wild: Woman Dies in Alaska River Trying to Reach Famous Bus.”

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Saverin, “The Chris McCandless Obsession Problem”; Holland, “Chasing Alexander Supertramp.”

<sup>62</sup> Levenson, “‘Into the Wild’ Bus, Seen as a Danger, Is Airlifted from the Alaskan Wild.”

<sup>63</sup> Christopher McCandless et al., “A Note from Jon Krakauer,” *Back to the Wild*; Krakauer, foreword to *The Wild Truth*, ix–xiii.

<sup>64</sup> Rea, “‘Into the Wild,’ with Sean Penn’s ‘Sad Reflection,’” para. 10.

<sup>65</sup> Ryan, “Transmedia Storytelling,” 6.

<sup>66</sup> The analysis of *Into the Wild* thus suggests that top-down and grass-roots configurations should not be seen as a simple opposition but as two extreme positions on a longer and more complex continuum.

<sup>67</sup> Here cross-media refers to the use of different media platforms to deliver the same content (see note 6).

<sup>68</sup> Penn's film played a part in the transmedia expansion of *Into the Wild*, as it made the story more widely known. Yet the only element of the narrative world that directly followed the film was the Discovery Channel's reality television series, *Out of the Wild*, that is the most openly, commercially oriented element of this world. Although some later narrative elements mention the film, they first and most often refer to Krakauer's book.

<sup>69</sup> Christopher McCandless et al., *Back to the Wild*, "Dear Reader."

<sup>70</sup> Krakauer, foreword to *The Wild Truth*, xii–xiii.

<sup>71</sup> Associated Press, "'Into the Wild' Pilgrimages Increase in Alaska."

<sup>72</sup> Roberts Forde, "Profit and Public Interest," 562–79.

<sup>73</sup> Hersey, "Hiroshima," 18–60; Hersey, *Hiroshima*; Hersey, "Hiroshima: The Aftermath," 37–63.

<sup>74</sup> Yavenditti, "John Hersey and the American Conscience," 24–49.

<sup>75</sup> Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*.

<sup>76</sup> Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*; Bowden, "Narrative Journalism Goes Multi-media."

<sup>77</sup> Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*; Mills and Bowden, *Somalia: Good Intentions, Deadly Results*.

<sup>78</sup> Scott, *Black Hawk Down*. For an example of the controversies raised by the movie, see Fryer, "Jingoism Jibe over Black Hawk Down."

<sup>79</sup> Koenig, *Serial*. Fall 2014, Season 1, Episodes 1–12.

<sup>80</sup> O'Meara, "'Like Movies for Radio': Media Convergence and the *Serial* Podcast Sensation."

<sup>81</sup> Chaudry, Miller, and Simpson, *Undisclosed*.

<sup>82</sup> Chaudry, *Adnan's Story*.

<sup>83</sup> Chapman, *Confessions of a Serial Alibi*.

<sup>84</sup> Genovese, *Adnan Syed: Innocent or Guilty?*; Berg, *The Case against Adnan Syed*.

<sup>85</sup> Koenig, *Serial*, February 2016, Season 1: Update, Day 1–3.

<sup>86</sup> Richanbach, "The Final Episode of *Serial*"; Yacenda, *American Vandal*.

<sup>87</sup> Koenig, *Serial*, Winter 2015–16, Season 2, Episodes 1–11; Fall–Winter 2018, Season 3, Episodes 1–9.

<sup>88</sup> *Unbelievable* is based on "An Unbelievable Story of Rape," written by T. Christian Miller (*ProPublica*) and Ken Armstrong (Marshall Project) and published in 2015. *Dirty John* is based on a series of articles sharing the same headline, written by Christopher Goffard and published in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2017.

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