

# Getting Lost “Into the Wild”: Understanding Consumers’ Movie Enjoyment Through a Narrative Transportation Approach

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## ABSTRACT

As consumers enjoy watching movies for many reasons, this paper takes an existential-phenomenological perspective to discuss movie consumption as holistic private lived experiences. By using interactive introspection, the two researchers examined their own individual private consumption experiences with the recently released movie *Into the Wild* (US 2007) as a complex tapestry of interrelated factors. The introspective data indicates that a consumer’s personal engagement with the movie narrative, its characters and underlying philosophy is of particular importance for one’s enjoyment of the movie. This allows for and even enhances the consumer’s temporary feeling of complete immersion into the movie’s imaginary world.

## INTRODUCTION

For more than a century, consumers all over the world have enjoyed watching movies for many reasons that can range from mere short-term entertainment to the personal experience of complete immersion into the movie narrative (Green, Brock and Kaufman 2004) and identification with its characters (Cohen 2001). Yet, a closer review of the literature on movie consumption indicates that we still lack a full understanding of how an ordinary consumer experiences the consumption of movies and what subjective contribution it makes to one’s quality of life. This scant attention may have resulted from marketing’s primary interest in the economic dimensions of movie consumption, where the focus is often limited to box office performances or the sales and rentals of DVDs in specified markets (De Vany and Walls 2002; Hennig-Thurau, Walsh and Bode 2004; Ravid 1999). In doing so, movie consumption is usually reduced to the mere purchase of individual tangible media formats (Basil 2001; Krugman and Gopal 1991) rather than investigated as the actual consumption of movies as intangible brands in themselves (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2008). In film studies, on the other hand, researchers seek to explain the effects of movies on their audiences by means of audience-response theory (Mulvey 1975; Phillips 2003). This involves trained expert viewers discussing in theory how an imaginary, idealised viewer would respond to movie texts and the cinematic experience by assuming probable motives, expectations and prior knowledge (Hirschman 1999). However, a synthesis of ideas from psychoanalysis, linguistics, semiotics, Marxism and feminism has hereby created the image of a passive viewer, who is vulnerable to the manipulative qualities of the cinematic experience (Phillips 2003). Moreover, expert viewers have often discussed suspected audience responses as a means to advance their own political-ideological agenda (see Mulvey (1975) as an excellent example).

A very different approach was recently taken by Wohlfeil and Whelan (2008), in which one of the authors observed introspectively his own experiential consumption of the movie *Pride & Prejudice* (UK 2005). While they identified a complex tapestry of interconnected factors contributing to a consumer’s movie enjoyment, they found a consumer’s personal engagement with the film narrative and its characters to be of particular importance and provided thereby evidence for the applicability of narrative transportation theory (Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2000) to movie consumption. Though primarily applied to reading, this theory suggests that enjoyment can benefit from the experience of being

immersed in a narrative world through cognitive, emotional and imaginary involvement as well as from the consequences of that immersion, which include emotional connections with characters and self-transformations (Green et al. 2004: 311). Transportation is hereby seen as a process by which the consumer actively seeks to be taken away from one’s everyday life into different narrative worlds, where one could experience a different self and engage empathetically with media characters like real friends (Gerrig 1993). This private engagement is further enhanced through out-of-text intertextuality by which the consumer connects the movie to one’s own personal life experiences (Hirschman 2000a; Wohlfeil and Whelan 2008). In a recent study, Argo, Zhui and Dahl (2008) found that consumers’ immersion into melodramatic narratives may be dependent on the level of fictionality, whereby females tend to empathise more readily with narratives that feature factual contents, while males prefer to loose themselves in narratives with highly fictional contents.

But similar to previous studies (i.e. Green and Brock 2000; Rapp and Gerrig 2006), their hypotheses were only tested within laboratory experiments, where the staged and artificial setup had little resemblance to consumers’ real-life experiences. The findings also contradict Wohlfeil and Whelan’s (2008) introspective data, which provide clear evidence that the male researcher empathised and even identified strongly with the rather factual narrative and characters in *Pride & Prejudice* (UK 2005). Hence, the question remains whether there is any evidence that those findings on transportation theory would reflect consumers’ real-lived movie consumption experiences. Taking an existential-phenomenological perspective (Thompson 1997; Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989), this study therefore aims to provide alternative insights into consumers’ holistic movie consumption experiences. As both authors happen to be of different gender, come from different cultural backgrounds and live in different countries, we will compare, examine and discuss our own individual private lived consumption experiences with the recently released movie *Into the Wild* (Dir.: Sean Penn, US 2007) and how we connected the movie to our personal life experiences by using interactive introspection (Ellis 1991; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993).

## METHODOLOGY

In order to truly understand movie consumption as a holistic phenomenological experience from an insider perspective, the focus has to be on the consumer experience in the way it presents itself to consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Thompson et al. 1989). Subsequently, we used a research method known as subjective personal introspection (SPI), which is an experiential, private self-reflection on joys and sorrows related to consumption and found in one’s own everyday participation in the human condition (Holbrook 1995: 201). This method has an advantage of allowing the researcher for an easy, unlimited 24-hour access to an insider’s lived experiences with the investigated phenomenon without having to wrestle with ethical concerns regarding the informants’ privacy (Brown 1998; Gould 2006). However, this also means that we now have to disappoint all those readers who were expecting to find hard, scientific data obtained through hypothetical-deductive methods. Instead, we followed for this study an approach that could be broadly described as interactive introspection and involves

gaining illuminative subjective insights through comparing, contrasting and interpreting introspective essays (Ellis 1991; Patterson et al. 1998; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993).

As it happens, both authors are of different gender and live in different countries. The first author is female, in her 20s, Algerian, lives in Southern France and is for the purpose of this paper referred to as the female viewer (FV). The second author is male, in his 30s, German, lives in the South of Ireland and is now referred to as the male viewer (MV). Both researchers wrote independently from each other an extensive introspective essay on their personal experiential consumption of the movie *Into the Wild* (Dir.: Sean Penn, US 2007), which, by coincidence, they have both watched recently. Based on Jon Krakauer's bestselling book, the movie retells the true story of Christopher McCandless, a young college graduate who decided to abandon his worldly possessions and leave his perfectly planned out life behind in order to escape the trappings of a society he despised by experiencing natural life in all its immediacy in the Alaskan wilderness. While his journey and view on life touched a number of people along the way, his romantic idealism ultimately leads to his doom at the unforgiving hands of Mother Nature. We then exchanged the two essays and each researcher compared and analysed them for both common emic themes and individual differences (Thompson 1997). Finally, we compared our two personal interpretations of the introspective essays for similarities and/or differences and summarised them accordingly (Gould 2006; Patterson et al. 1998).

### MAJOR FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF THE DATA

The thorough analysis of the introspective data obtained from our personal holistic lived experiences of consuming *Into the Wild* (US 2007) has revealed some very interesting findings. For both viewers, the essence of our private movie enjoyment was the arousal, pleasure and emotional stimulation obtained from the cinematic consumption experience (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) rather than from maximising some ominous economic benefits (Basil 2001; Eliashberg and Shugan 1997). However, while a tapestry of interrelated factors contributed to the overall movie consumption experience, both viewers experienced the strong personal emotional engagement with the movie narrative and our subsequent ability to lose ourselves mentally *Into the Wild* (US 2007) as essential to our enjoyment of the movie. This confirmed Wohlfeil and Whelan's (2008) earlier findings, as evidenced in the following extracts:

In terms of the lead character Chris, my relationship with him changed several times over the film. At the beginning, I disliked him because he appears to be another spoiled, rebellious and stupid rich kid that feels himself to be totally misunderstood. Then, when the family history was revealed I started to understand his motivations and even empathised with him in his search for a better, more harmonic life based on love and mutual respect. I even understood when he failed to grab his first opportunity. After all, I have failed to notice a few times as well that everything I was looking for was directly in front of my eyes and I just had to take it, but I was too scared or too stupid to see it. However, after he obviously knew that he has found what he was looking for in the flesh right in front of his eyes and feet and still left to fulfil a naïve, romanticised fantasy, then I thought again "what an idiot!" (MV)

"*Into the Wild*" left me sobbing like a baby; I would go as far as to say uncontrollably—Thank God, I saw this alone and in the

darkness. Regarding the character, one scene that stands out in particular is McCandless killing a moose. It both vividly illustrates an intimate aspect of living in the wild and provides an almost existential moment-to-moment take on the newly discovered aspects of the character. (FV)

The story itself is an incredibly important one. Ever had that feeling of wanting to abandon your existing life and living one step closer to nature? I can't deny being touched by the relationships that Alexander (Emile Hirsch) makes on his travels and I was haunted by images of Alexander desperately trying to get food in the Alaskan wilds, in particular his efforts with a moose. This was storytelling so good it could bring you to tears. I was convinced as to touching the nature of Christopher/Alexander. (FV)

It was a captivating movie experience and I believe that it is one of those movies that you can watch over and over again and each time you will discover something new and different. It's also kind of going on a journey of self-discovery yourself each time you watch the film. My relation to the characters differed. I didn't really identify with anyone of them, but empathised strongly with the hippie couple (Catherine Keener and Brian Dierker), Ron Franz (Hal Holbrook) and even Carine—but the latter could be influenced by my admiration for Jena Malone as the actress who portrayed her. (MV)

Both viewers also experienced an equally intensive level of immersion and empathy with the factual movie narrative. Thus, the introspective data would contradict Argo et al.'s (2008) prediction that a consumer's ability to empathise with melodramatic narratives—whether factual or fictional—would be determined by one's gender. In fact, the data would contradict the suggestion that a consumer's ability to immerse in and empathise with a melodramatic movie narrative would be determined by any of the common socio-demographic variables such as age, ethnicity, nationality or cultural background. But while its intensity may appear to be similar, we discovered nonetheless some interesting differences in each viewer's account of our private lived movie consumption experiences, which influenced the nature of the personal transportation experience and, hence, warrant a closer examination. Although both viewers agreed that each of our private *Into the Wild* (US 2007) consumer experiences started with a search for relevant information across similar media (i.e. magazines, IMDb, websites, TV or YouTube) long before actually watching the movie in the cinema, the type of information we sought and our underlying motivations to do so differed significantly:

Once a couple of years, there comes a movie that is both unapologetically soulful and offers a gentle philosophical take on one of the timeless myths and human tendencies. ... The first time I heard about the film was in January 2008 in a French TV talk show. I decided to learn more about the movie by looking for information on the Internet. ... I ensured myself of the quality of the movie by gathering much information on the story, the character, the moviemaker Sean Penn, magazine criticisms; comments comparison between French and English websites. In addition, I checked for the box office of the English media on Yahoo UK. (FV)

My interest and experiential consumption of this movie actually started already as early as October 2006, when I read in an interview with Jena Malone in Mean magazine that it was just

being filmed...As it so happened, in this article she talked not only about her then recent film release "*The Go-Getter*" and her increasing interest in expressing herself in self-produced music and short films, but also that she would soon starting to film "*Into the Wild*" with Sean Penn. Jena Malone then vividly recalls how she had accidentally hung up on Sean Penn when he phoned her at home near Lake Tahoe to cast her, because due to a defective connection she couldn't hear him and thought it was an obscene call. I really loved the way she told the story during the interview...In September 2007, the movie trailer of "*Into the Wild*" appeared on YouTube. Without hesitation I used YouTube Catcher to download the trailer. Not that the trailer was giving much away, but it definitely stimulated an appetite for more in me...Jena Malone being in the movie was enough reason for me to must see it anyway!!! (MV)

As it turned out, the male viewer is the self-confessed fan of a movie actress and much of his interest in the movie, subsequently, stems from her involvement in the movie production. In fact, he became only aware of the movie as a result of reading an interesting interview with her. Furthermore, much of his information search was directly associated with the actress, such as catching glimpses of her in the movie trailer, downloading video clips of her interviews or photos of her at the movie premiere. The female viewer, on the other hand, had no fan-related interests and learnt only by chance about the film in a TV show. Her search for information about the movie was driven by her awakened interest in its mythological narrative (Hirschman 2000b), the true background story and the lead character's philosophical ideals, which have touched her emotionally. The movie, nevertheless, has also awakened in her an admiration for the leading actor Emile Hirsch—though her perception of him blurred increasingly by merging his off-screen persona with his on-screen character.

Emile Hirsch gave the best performance of his career and he literally carried the whole movie on his shoulders...I shared the same values as Emile Hirsch who goes on to display a person, who is selfless and whose goal is simply to go somewhere where he can live peacefully... Throughout, it was Emile's smiles and caring advice that seem to be constant reminders to me to have hope, to believe that there's more out there than the rat race we're so wrapped up in. (FV)

As a result of those different individual motivations for watching this movie, both viewers also differed in our personal engagement with the movie's melodramatic narrative and the characters as well as in the way we actually lost ourselves in the movie experience. As is already evident in the earlier extracts and confirming Wohlfeil and Whelan's (2008) earlier findings, the male viewer engaged very closely and emotionally with the individual characters in the movie—a response that most previous literature only ascribed to female audiences. Oatley (1999) and Cohen (2001) argued that personal engagement with literary characters and their stories in novels can take with increasing level of immersion broadly three different forms. On the weakest level, a consumer merely sympathises with the characters (= feels with them) as a side-participant who likes them. On the next level, the consumer feels empathy for the character (= shares the character's emotions) because of perceived similarities to one's own private experiences. Finally, the consumer identifies with the character (= feels the character's emotions as one's own) for the moment similar to an actor playing a role.

While sympathising with the parents in their desperate, but fruitless search for their son, the male viewer empathised during his movie consumption experience strongly with the hippie couple, Ron Franz and Chris's sister Carine. However, much of his empathy for her may result from his admiration for the actress Jena Malone, who portrayed her. On the other hand, though he didn't directly admit to it, there is also evidence that his ambivalent emotional engagement with the lead character Christopher McCandless is more than positive and negative empathy, but in fact a form of identification (Cohen 2001). Indeed, the use of out-of-text intertextuality (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2008), by which the male viewer connected Christopher's experiences on screen with his personal life experiences, suggests that the character's naivety, idealism, motives and even foolishness served as a mirror through which the male viewer relived his own experiences.

While Chris moves on and meets a kind couple of hippies (Catherine Keener and Brian Dierker) with their own sad background story of a lost son, we can see in flashbacks behind the façade of the McCandless family life. His father is a career-minded individual for whom his family is more or less a necessary status symbol... Chris and Carine are consistently caught up in the middle of [their parents regular] fights or even recipients to the fighting. More and more I was beginning to understand the motivation behind Chris's actions. His journey wasn't really the expressed statement of an over-ideological kid, but a desperate attempt of escaping from the white suburban middle-class society that his family represented. (MV)

And I could fully empathise with him now, as I also sought myself to escape desperately from a (lower working-class) living environment I was growing up in and deeply despised... Most of the time, I was told what I couldn't do and any dream, creativity or ambition for experiencing and doing something different, something that matters, was cruelly slaughtered [by parents, teachers, career counsellors] right from the start... Instead, I ended up working in retailing for years. In all those years, movies provided me with the only source of escape and the only source of inspiration—like Jack London novels did for Chris McCandless. I needed to get out... (MV)

Interestingly, the female viewer did not really sympathise, empathise or even identify with any of the characters as such. In taking a macro-perspective, her transportation experiences were instead based on her personal engagement with the lead character's (and, thus, the story's) philosophical view on looking for the human condition and the meaning of life in modern Western societies rather than with his person. Thus, the female viewer seemed to empathise or even identify herself essentially with the presented ideals by connecting them through out-of-text intertextuality with her own personal ideals and philosophical views—an aspect that the literature on narrative transportation theory has overlooked so far, but would warrant further, more detailed investigation at a different occasion.

The mission of Christopher seemed to be showing that at some point a long time ago, we got so far from what it's really all supposed to be about. He lived by example in showing that the best way to try to figure out, where we went wrong, would be to go back to when man lived in the wild, surviving only on his wits and his instincts. At the end, he made the ultimate sacrifice trying to figure out the answer for us—and he did—that

we are social beings, who need companionship and society to be really happy. (FV)

I think that *Into the Wild* is a gentle mediation on the poetry of the road and the extent to which personal philosophy is coloured by our own bruised sensibilities (some people don't feel they deserve to be loved, says McCandless to the ageing hippie at one point) and drive to be free, primarily free of emotional attachment to people. It explores the thin line between idealism and escapism, freedom from and responsibility to others, and the degree to which our tendency to sleepwalk through our choices can sneak up on the ideal of living in the wild far from the modern society. (FV)

However, despite our different motivations for watching the movie and, subsequently, the different nature of our personal transportation experiences with *Into the Wild*, for both viewers watching a film is like being in a dream where we can enjoy the peaceful moment of losing ourselves into the melodramatic narrative for awhile. Hence, both reviewers engaged in a certain routine of additional consumer behaviour to enhance their movie consumption experiences in advance. The female viewer, for example, discovered that the film was not shown in her local cinema, so that she had to carefully plan for a 1 hour train journey to the nearby city on the weekend, where the movie was actually screened. In order to make the trip worthwhile, she decided to meet up with friends and to go shopping, which she arranged around her main event—the cinematic movie experience.

I learnt that "*Into the Wild*" had only been released in Poitiers, which is an hour journey away from the town I live in. I decided to go there on the next weekend to watch the movie and to spend some time with my friends there. Before booking my train tickets, I first phoned the cinema to enquire about their time schedules for showing *Into the Wild*... The next weekend, I arrived on the morning to have lunch with my friends and do some shopping in the area before going to the cinema. But I did not ask them to go with me to the cinema, because I preferred to be on my own and not to share the movie experience with them for the simple reason that I didn't want to listen to other people's troubles, but to lose myself in the movie's story. (FV)

The male viewer also faced the difficulty that the film wasn't screened in a cinema nearby and had to consider a 50 minutes bus trip towards to a multiplex further away or to wait for the DVD release. Fortunately for him, the local arthouse cinema was showing *Into the Wild* (US 2007) four weeks later and he chose this option at the end. But this also turned out to be an advantage, as he prefers the more personal and intellectual atmosphere of arthouse cinemas in comparison to that of modern multiplexes, which he perceives to be noisy, commoditised and disrespectful to film as an art form with their blockbuster & popcorn diet. Interestingly, both viewers had in common that we prefer to watch movies on our own and not to share the experience with others. While this doesn't necessarily mean that we won't sometimes (but not always) discuss the movie with friends afterwards (!), both of us simply feel that the presence of friends during actually watching the film may only invite continuous comments or chats about private matters that disrupt or even prevent us from enjoying our transportation experiences. In fact, we experience all disruptive influences on our movie enjoyment, which also include late-comers, talking audience members, chatty teenagers and noisy families with kids running wild around, simply as quite annoying and frustrating.

I know only too well that many people decide to go to the cinema on a rather short notice and then often choose the respective movie on the spot—a regrettable habit that has probably emerged from the rise (and partial monopolisation) of the multiplexes and their brainless blockbuster & popcorn diet—but I'm not one of them. ... The good thing about Kino [an arthouse cinema] is that it is visited by an older and more intellectual clientele, which means that the chance of being surrounded by consistently chatting teenagers, running kids and permanently interrupting insensible families, which has become such a common and annoying feature experience with the multiplexes, is close to zero. The diet of independent movies is anyway beyond their interest and intellectual horizon. Thus, the chance to genuinely and truly lose myself in the movie was quite good. (MV)

However, the movie consumption experience didn't stop for both viewers with watching the movie in the cinema. Instead, both of us engaged in efforts to transform our temporary, intangible movie experiences into tangible objects to prolong our enjoyment of the movie, its melodramatic narrative and its atmospheric audiovisual impression on our minds. Therefore, each of us enhanced our movie consumption experience by purchasing movie-related items and merchandising such as a CD of the soundtrack, an original cast-signed movie poster, movie stills and, maybe most important of them all, the movie itself on DVD. The overall aim of this kind of consumer behaviour enabled both viewers to experience the movie enjoyment either once again and/or to provide clues for remembering one's feelings from watching the movie for the first time.

The film went around in my head for days. I purchased on eBay this autographed movie poster, which was personally signed by the entire cast, to decorate the wall of my office directly over my desk. It still hangs there. In the meantime, I also bought on eBay the official press booklet for \$2.99. And I placed already a pre-order on Amazon.com for the region 1 double-disc DVD pack of the film, which will be released on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2008. The region 2 DVD will be released in the UK one week later and I hope it will also be available in Ireland, because I intend to buy it for my collection as well. (MV)

I was interested in the awesome movie soundtrack of "*Into the Wild*" as well, which was so beautiful and so touching. Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam was simply brilliant and deserves an Oscar for this effort. All the songs are just so powerful and bring back the deep emotion from the movie. It's simply amazing how Eddie Vedder wrote songs that fit perfectly with Christopher McCandless's story. However, I did not know the singer, but I knew how to deal with this problem. Indeed, I've gone through the same research process in relation to "*Blood Diamond*" in order to identify the singer's name on the Internet. Of course, my primary interest was to check for a free video on YouTube and, then, to buy the soundtrack on CD, because it reminds me of the movie—even if it was a little bit expensive. (FV)

As can be seen from the last extract, the soundtrack of the movie served to enhance the nature of the female viewer's experienced immersion into the movie melodramatic narrative based on her identification with the presented underlying philosophy on the human condition. Yet, not only had the musical soundtrack provided her with this kind of stimulation, but also the impressive and captivating cinematography of the Alaskan wilderness, which fascinated and drew her literally into the narrative. Urry (1990)



proposed that, as an individual chooses to gaze upon a specific place, anticipation is sustained through a variety of distant non-tourist practices, such as films that construct and reinforce the gaze. In recent years, the *Lord of the Rings*-Trilogy and *Whale Rider* are known to have increased public awareness and demand among international tourists for travelling to New Zealand. Hence, by watching *Into the Wild* (US 2007), the female viewer experienced in her the growing desire to visit the shown landscape of Alaska in its natural beauty and purity herself as a tourist one day soon, which also stimulated an interested search on information about Alaska.

After watching *Into the Wild*, my interest in visiting Alaska has intensified. I was inspired to visit some of the locales and landscapes featured in the film. I learned about Alaska through the movie and I was positively influenced by the beautiful areas in the US displayed in "*Into the Wild*". (FV)

### CONCLUSIONS

The study's findings clearly prove that movie enjoyment should be understood as a private lived consumption experience that depends on a holistic tapestry of interrelated factors and, subsequently, should be studied in its entire complexity. Subjective personal introspection offers hereby the potential for gaining interesting insights into the private domain of movie consumption that is less accessible to the traditional methods, which focus mainly on the collective domain. In line with previous studies, we found that an individual's personal emotional engagement with the narrative, its characters and underlying philosophy, which allow for the temporary immersion into the movie's world, is of particular importance for one's movie enjoyment. The level and nature of a consumer's experienced immersion into the movie narrative is determined less by age or gender, but by one's very private motives and interests.

The managerial implication of these findings is for film producers to stop heeding the calls of consultants (i.e. De Vany and Walls 2002; Eliashberg and Shugan 1997) for mass-produced, family-friendly, made-by-standard-formula movie packages that serve the smallest common denominator. As consumers want to enjoy the feeling of loosing themselves in the movie consumption experience for diverse personal and intimate motives, the narrative has to be challenging and stimulate personal engagement from a variety of different angles. This would require each movie to be created again as an artistic product rather than as an interchangeable commodity. The point seems to be supported in particular by the recent global success and the growing popularity of both independent films and world cinema movies that tend to provide audiences with unique, interesting, involving, challenging and much more demanding narratives than Hollywood's current standardised and family-friendly blockbuster-diet. Moreover, after loosing their former elitist image, arthouse cinemas and film-clubs in Europe are becoming increasingly popular alternatives to the multiplex cinema chains, which are often the vertically-integrated exhibition division of the major Hollywood studios (Kerrigan and Özbilgin 2002, 2004). Maybe, rather following the advice of accountants and consultants, it is time for film producers to listen again to real consumers as to how and why they enjoy watching movies in order to understand what movie consumption is really all about...

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