Landscaping Wilderness in Hollywood Westerns and Brazilian Nordesterns

Michael Ashman
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/9676

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Landscaping Wilderness in Hollywood Westerns

and Brazilian Nordesterns

Michael Ashman

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Robert Colson, Chair
Christopher Oscarson
Rex Nielson

Department of Comparative Arts and Letters

Brigham Young University

Copyright © 2022 Michael Ashman

All Rights Reserved
ABSTRACT

Landscaping Wilderness in Hollywood Westerns and Brazilian Nordesterns

Michael Ashman
Department of Comparative Arts and Letters, BYU
Master of Arts

In this comparative examination of cinematic representations of American and Brazilian wildernesses, I argue for the necessity of a transnational, postregional, and ecocritical approach to film studies. The way that the deserts of the American West are represented by Hollywood Western filmmakers reveal underlying ecological and political philosophies, and provide a productive contrast with representations of the sertão, a similarly arid biome in Brazil. Among other theoretical approaches, this study uses W. J. T. Mitchell’s idea of “landscape” as a verb to examine the formal devices by which filmmakers and audiences “landscape” these “wildernesses.” Using John Ford’s The Searchers (1956) as an example, I suggest that Hollywood Westerns inscribe the land with a colonial gaze that reflects and perpetuates a dualistic conception of nature, one that sees nature as separate and distinct from humankind. Cinema Novo, the radical anticolonial movement in Brazilian cinema, provides an aesthetic and philosophical alternative. Through an analysis of one of Cinema Novo’s foundational works by one of its founding figures—Glauber Rocha’s Deus e o diabo na terra do sol [Black God, White Devil] (1964)—I demonstrate how the theory and practice of Rocha’s anticolonial “aesthetic of hunger” has an ecological dimension, one that rejects and collapses a binary opposition between humans and nature. By looking beyond borders which too often function not only as national boundaries but to delimit fields of academic study, this project finds common ground for comparison in representations of nature, and demonstrates the political and ecological implications thereof.

Keywords: ecocriticism, transnational, postregional, postwestern, frontier, rhizomatic, West, Westerns, westness, wilderness, landscape, landscaping, Glauber Rocha, Deus e o diabo na terra do sol, Black God, White Devil, John Ford, The Searchers
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

According to the guidelines for submitting a thesis, this “acknowledgments” section is optional, and even though (true to form) I find myself writing this at 3 AM the morning after Dr. Colson asked me to have it submitted, I’m compelled to wrap up this thesis and degree by writing some words of acknowledgment and appreciation for the people who have helped and supported me along the way.

First and foremost, I have to thank my family—my mom, my dad, and my sister, Kate—without whom I wouldn’t be here, not only in a literal sense but also thanks to their moral support. I'll lump my friends in here as well (“the family you choose,” as they say), a group which probably includes anyone taking the time to read this.

There are many others to whom I owe the pleasure of being in this position to thank them in the acknowledgment section of my thesis. Thanks to my committee Dr. Rex Nielson, Dr. Chip Oscarson, and Dr. Rob Colson for their time spent discussing and reviewing my work. The roots of this project and the routes along which it has developed could be traced back to classes and conversations I’ve had with each of them over the years. Thanks in particular to Dr. Colson for his patience as chair of my committee, for his persistence during the weeks over which he told me I should finally start writing and for the hours spent in Google docs with me once the writing process finally did start—the specter of his Google profile icon popping in and out while I write has kept me motivated during these past few months.

I’ve had many great mentors throughout my education, including but not limited to those on my committee. All of my humanities professors have been wonderfully supportive. I want to thank Dr. James Krause for encouraging me to pursue a graduate degree before I ever considered it as an option or had any idea what it entailed. Four years ago I certainly didn’t imagine that I would be here putting the finishing touches on a thesis project. All of my teachers at every level of my education deserve to be thanked, as well as anyone who has ever complimented or constructively criticized my writing. And thank you, for reading.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location, Location, Location</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Wilderness to Landscape</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsettling the West in Cinema Novo</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filmography</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once upon a time, Western symbols such as “wide-brimmed hats,” horses, revolvers with “endless bullets” functioned as signifiers of a distinctively American identity, icons deployed in the service of a nascent nationalism. Three years after the census declared that the frontier was no more, Frederick Jackson Turner posited in his 1893 address that “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” is that the boundless potential of continued westward expansion “furnished the forces dominating American character” (3). Deprived of this defining feature, it might have seemed that America was facing an identity crisis. Yet despite the census superintendent’s and Turner’s premature declaration of the frontier’s death—or perhaps because of it—the West has lived on in the cultural imagination through its images and stories of how the West was won, the taming and civilizing of the frontier. As the birth of cinema coincided roughly with the geographic death of the frontier, at the time
for this imaginative need, film has served as a primary vehicle for the West’s cultural staying power. Through film the “winning of a wilderness,” in Turner’s terms, can be a repeated process: the mythical West can be constructed, reconstructed, and deconstructed for filmmakers’ and audiences’ imaginative exploration.

*Once Upon a Time in the West*—even in its title Sergio Leone’s famous “Spaghetti Western” evokes the constructedness of a mythical past. In its original Italian, *C’era una volta il West* (1968) demonstrates that the West is not, or not only, the property of the United States: by maintaining the English “West” (instead of using the Italian “ovest,”) Leone emphasizes that the West in his film—despite filming in locations as diverse as the United States, Italy, and Spain—is the American West, and like that West, an imaginative construction. The director himself once said that “America is really the property of the world,” and his films, along with the critical writings and films of countless others, such as Brazil’s Glauber Rocha, demonstrate this (quoted in Campbell 118). It is the *idea* of the American West that has historical significance, not just to the United States but the rest of the world, and an *idea* of the West that continues to live on—an idea unbounded by national frontiers.

Once upon a time, the West was thought of as both geographic and cultural property of the United States, but as a construction, it can’t belong exclusively to anyone—and its constructedness doesn’t happen in a vacuum, nor does it derive from a single source. Therefore a transnational, post-regional turn in recent scholarship offers a new lens for understanding the West and Westerns, one that not only includes but depends upon filmmakers like Leone and Glauber Rocha who worked outside the Hollywood studio system, one that posits that the West no longer belongs to the United States—nor did it ever. Neil Campbell, a pioneer of this move toward “Postwestern Studies,” proposes in his book
The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age (2011)

that the West should be conceived of as rhizomatic in nature: not as nationally “rooted,” but as “defined by complex connectivity,” as “globally produced,” as unbound, “unfinished, multiple, and ‘open’” (3, 38, 9). This transnational approach has been productively applied to the study of Western films in recent works. The resulting scholarship suggests that the mythical West and consequently Westerns are transnational and always have been (Mayer and Roche 4).

While these studies illuminate transnational networks of material and cultural exchange, and demonstrate how these exchanges reflect and perpetuate political philosophies, one aspect of the Western remains conspicuously overlooked in postwestern scholarship: the important role that the desert land and environment itself plays in the films. Glauber Rocha’s poetic introduction to the genre, partially quoted as epigraph above, is insightful because it invokes not only the familiar iconography of cowboys—the “wide-brimmed hats,” horses, revolvers with “endless bullets”—but also prairies, blazing suns, cacti, vast deserts. Rocha demonstrates that the West that lives in the collective cultural imagination is not just an assemblage of symbols, but land; not just land, but landscape.

This critical perspective of representations of frontier wilderness—one echoed in Rocha’s films—shows what a transnational, ecocritical approach to the Western offers: an opportunity to foreground that which has until now remained background; a means of revealing, by contrast, the relationship between representations of land, philosophies of nature, and colonial attitudes and

---

practices. A study of Hollywood Westerns makes it clear that the framing of the land is an integral aspect of the representations upon which America has based its national myths. As David Desser says in his foreword to *Cinema and Landscape*, “John Ford painted a portrait of the Old West as much with the buttes of Monument Valley as he did the increasingly careworn face of John Wayne” (10). The American idea of the West is inseparable from such iconic landscapes—from an inside perspective, without the presentation of alternatives, it is difficult to fully appreciate the role of the landscape. What has been missing from transnational postwestern studies then is ecocriticism, and what has been missing from ecocritical film studies is postwestern transnationalism: a consideration of land and landscape, the way that the frontier wilderness is represented in Hollywood Western films and Westerns from beyond Hollywood’s studio system. Approaching the West as rhizomatic reveals an ecological and colonial perspective presented by the Hollywood Western, as exemplified by John Ford, as well as an ecological and anti-colonial perspective in the Brazilian “Nordestern,” as exemplified by Glauber Rocha.3 One of Rocha’s westerns, *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* [*Black God, White Devil*] (1964) is not only aware of, but in many ways works as a response to Ford’s Westerns, and through this dialogue also provides a new perspective on canonical works such as *The Searchers* (1956).4 An analysis of these alternative representations of similar wildernesses makes possible a transnational ecocritical reading that illuminates both texts.

---

3 It’s worth noting that Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome utilized by Campbell is ecological in itself—related to roots—and therefore lends itself naturally to ecocriticism.
4 The translated title for the release of Glauber Rocha’s film in the United States, while provocative and evocative of the dialectic oppositions in his original title—which would be more directly translated as *God and the Devil in the Land of the Sun*—loses its sense of setting and embeddedness in nature, which is one of the reasons I’ve opted to use the original Portuguese title.
Location, Location, Location

The usefulness of an ecocritical approach to these films owes to the way that they privilege shooting on location. From the cinematic Western’s beginnings, location was a matter of utmost importance—it functioned not only as a signifier of a rugged authenticity that sold audiences on the narratives, but also as a spectacle and attraction in itself. The land is essential to the visual aesthetic of the films, providing a novel, exotic view that brought the West’s wilderness landscapes to audiences around the country and throughout the world. The appeal of these particular landscapes is evident in audiences’ rejection of substitutes: Westerns made in the environs of early film production centers on the East Coast were derisively referred to as “Eastern Westerns” and largely dismissed as inauthentic and cheap. Filmmakers and audiences alike were attracted to Western landscapes because “the [exotic] West was not the [familiar] East” (quoted in Erish 53). The wilderness as landscape was therefore at least as essential to Western films’ popularity as their narratives. Looking at the role of wilderness first in Hollywood Westerns and then in Brazilian Nordesterns reveals the significance of these representations.

The importance of authentic Western scenery motivated Western filmmakers to shoot on location. Inside or outside, on a set or in the wild, a distinguishing feature of film which separates it from other artforms is that it requires a physical setting in which to place the camera, and therefore interacts in some way with a “real world” setting, though to varying degrees—film, then, is inherently
ecological. On-location shooting has been a practice since the earliest days of cinema, with inventors-turned-filmmakers such as the Lumières and Thomas Edison using their new technology to record the world: the famous train arriving at the station, the workers leaving the factory, and countless less-famous “actualités.” But as films grew in length and narrative complexity, and the development of film sound and color technologies required cumbersome equipment that made on-location shooting a challenge, many film productions moved to sets and studios for the sake of convenience. In a time when most narrative fiction film directors were working in the controlled environments of Hollywood studio backlots, Western filmmakers ventured out into the wilderness to capture their images. Savvy studios’ and distributors’ marketing of them as “outdoor pictures” highlights the novelty and significance of this production practice and demonstrates that the concept of nature and landscapes was a selling point for audiences. Due to the way Western filmmakers privilege shooting on location, their films have an intimate relationship with nature—the question of landscape and setting is intrinsically tied up in the genre, which, as a result, is particularly revealing of ecological philosophies.

This distinguishing characteristic of film—an intimate relationship between film image and the physical, phenomenal world of which Westerns, due to on location shooting, are exemplary—opens film texts up for ecocritical analysis. In his book *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (2015), Daniel Yacavone offers a vocabulary and conceptual framework to explore film’s selecting.

---

5 If, as Timothy Morton posits in *The Ecological Thought*, “all art—not just explicitly ecological art—hardwires the environment into its form,” surely film must be the most ecological among arts (17). Even the black backdrops of Edison’s “Black Maria” constitute a setting, as Henri Lefebvre observes (*Landscape and Film* 21). Digitally created environments made possible by technological advancements of the last couple of decades complicate this relationship, but spatial relationships between the camera, actors, and green/blue screen environments are still an essential part of filmmaking.
rearranging, and transformation of the sights and sounds of the phenomenal world. Following Martin Heidegger, Yacavone invites us to consider “world” not only as a noun but as a verb: to think about how films “world” the world. Through a process of “worlding,” a film takes and rearranges the “real world” to become a world in itself. As Eric Hayot has elaborated elsewhere, “while [a] work [of art] is, in the Heideggerian sense, a world, it also shows a world... Both work and world show both world and its worlding” (25). In other words, a work of art is itself a “world” but also presents the world, and in this presentation reveals its own “worlding.” Yacavone helpfully gives each of these “worlds” a unique designation, distinguishing between the “world-in” a film, or that which is represented, and the “world-of” the film, or the representation itself, the “world” which a film constitutes (3). Following Hayot and Yacavone, a film’s worlding should be evident in analyzing the world-of the film—the process by which a film represents its world-in should offer grounds for analysis. What does the worlding of wilderness reveal about humans’ conception of nature?

Hollywood Western films world the land as landscape, and in doing so, betray a colonizing perspective. Theory provides a conceptual vocabulary useful for examining how cinematic landscapes inscribe a colonial gaze in the film image. Henri Lefebvre makes an important distinction between landscape and setting—while all films of necessity have a setting by virtue of taking place in a physical environment, not all films present their setting as landscape. In fact, it’s much more common that they don’t present their setting as landscape, since narrative cinema prioritizes narrative events and relegates the location to the background, while landscapes, by definition, demand an absence of narrative (22). Lefebvre responds to this problem by suggesting, through a study of art history and film theory, that audiences engage with films by alternating between a “narrative mode” and a “spectacular mode” based on in-text cues from the filmmakers. When they invite audiences to engage with landscapes in the
“spectacular mode,” Hollywood Western filmmakers like John Ford prompt audiences to see the land as separate and distinct from humankind—a binary philosophy of nature that encourages a colonial perspective and engages in that colonizing vision. W. J. T. Mitchell offers additional insight in his invitation to consider “landscape” not as a noun but as a verb (1). It is in this landscaping of the wilderness, the worlding of the Western, that filmmakers and spectators impose order on the land. Mitchell proposes that the verb landscape is a “process by which social and subjective identities are formed” (1), so analyzing this process to see how Hollywood Western films distinguish landscape from setting is therefore valuable to understanding ecological thought as well as ecological and political colonialism.

Cinematic landscaping in Hollywood Westerns is a reflection and perpetuation of the binary conception of wilderness historian William Cronon outlines in his oft-cited essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness.” Cronon interrogates the role wilderness plays as a concept in the cultural imagination and how this attitude affects ecological thinking. He provides a history of the term “wilderness” in the English language to demonstrate how its meaning has shifted through time, revealing how the concept of and attitude toward wilderness has been shaped by words and representations throughout history.

The use of “wilderness” in the English language up to the 1700s referred to landscapes that were “deserted,” “savage,” “desolate,” “barren”—in short, a “waste” (61). The connotations weren’t positive, and carried largely Biblical associations (such as Moses and the Israelites wandering in the wilderness). By 1900, this concept of wilderness had changed; “wilderness” was now a priceless asset: “Wilderness had once been the antithesis of all that was orderly and good—it had been the darkness, one might say, on the far side of the garden wall—and yet now it was frequently likened to Eden itself” (62). Wilderness became a place of escape and retreat, a place of action and adventure; a separate, distant
place where such things could happen. Despite these shifting connotations, it seems significant that throughout history, “wilderness” has consistently been defined as separate and distinct from humankind, whether as an uninviting, uninhabitable wasteland or as an Edenic escape. Cronon argues that the trouble with wilderness is therefore that it “embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural” (73). Cronon’s essay reveals how this dualistic attitude has been shaped through the cultural imagination, and the study of Westerns in this ecocritical context demonstrates how the cultural imagination continues to shape and be shaped by this conception of nature.

In the case of the Hollywood Western film, this dualistic attitude is manifest in landscaping—the way that the frame selects and imposes order on the land, inviting audiences to see it in the spectacular mode—as well as in Hollywood’s mode of film production. As demonstrated earlier, it was American Western filmmakers who were determined to bring exotic views of the West back East and around the world, and these Eastern audiences which basked in the sublime novelty of these landscapes. Filmmakers had to travel in order to bring “nature” to audiences, thus reifying a dualistic conception of nature and wilderness as separate.

This wilderness “world-in” of the West that is landscaped in Hollywood Westerns is comparable to the “world-in” of Brazilian Nordesters: Brazil’s sertão, a semi-arid wilderness with striking similarities to the deserts of the American West. Like the West, the sertão has a long history tangled up in colonialism—and like the West, the ways that the sertão has been worlded reflect that history, along with its dualistic conception of nature. Recent scholarship has explored the historical,

---

6 These similarities are not merely geographical: Mike Phillips also notes in his contribution to *Transnationalism and Imperialism* that “The two national genres display similar geographic terrains and material historical parallels, such as conflicts between social banditry and industrial progress, or between small farmers and cattle barons” (197).
political, and cultural role that the sertão has played as both concept and physical, geographical space. Rex Nielson’s work on the sertão examines its discursive function in Brazilian’s colonial history through a study of colonial maps, official documents, and literary sources. In early maps of Brazil, that territory which remained unsettled by the Portuguese was labeled as “sertão”—in this way, the sertão served as a signifier of the unknown, the uninhabited, perhaps the uninhabitable. The sertão took on a negative definition, a concept defined less by its own traits than against things: defined against modernity, against civilization. The sertão therefore existed on maps and in the Portuguese/Brazilian imaginary as that which remained uncolonized, and evoked barbarity—in this sense, a binary opposition between the civilization of humankind and nature, conceptually akin to English’s “wilderness” as separate.

As Brazil sought to define a unique identity for itself following its independence from Portugal and its establishment as a republic in 1889, the sertão played an increasingly significant cultural role. In literary and artistic representations, it suddenly came to signify—through conscious choices of worlding—a kernel of authenticity, a core of Brazilianness which could only thrive at a distance from the European metropoles. Therefore the sense of authenticity that the sertão gave Brazil as a source of national identity in many ways parallels the role of the West in American national mythmaking. Like the American wilderness, the concept of the Brazilian sertão has been worlded in several different ways to serve different ends throughout history. From early colonial maps up until the twentieth century, the sertão was inscribed with a colonial gaze that maintained an opposition between civilization and nature. It wasn’t until radically anti-colonial movements rejected that received aesthetic and ideological notion of wilderness that cinematic worldings of the sertão presented a different vision of nature.

The sertão played a central role in the early films of the Brazilian film movement known as Cinema Novo, which arose in the 1960s as one of a number of Third Cinema movements in Latin
America, themselves extensions of radical film movements (particularly in France and Italy) that reflected the growing political consciousness borne out of the radical atmosphere of the time. As one of the pioneers of Cinema Novo, the films and writings of Glauber Rocha—a Brazilian film critic, theorist, and filmmaker—are invaluable to studying this relationship between Westerns, Brazil, wilderness, and politics. Until recently, scholarship on Rocha has been conducted by and for the field of Luso-Brazilian studies, and therefore has tended to focus primarily on the significance of his role in Brazilian politics and culture. His radical politics are a common theme of this scholarship, with a particular emphasis on the political and philosophical implications of his “aesthetic of hunger” manifesto and his other revolutionary writings, or the drawing of connections between his thought and intellectual influences like Frantz Fanon.7 Other studies examine his representation of Brazilian folklore and religion, and his adaptation of Brazilian history and popular culture unique to Brazil such as cordel literature.8 His relationship to other filmmakers has largely been confined to the network of the Brazilian Cinema Novo movement and, slightly more expansively, to the location of Cinema Novo within other Latin American “Third Cinemas.”9 As someone who anticipated his own transnational significance by referring to himself as a “tricontinental” filmmaker, the insularity of academic fields of study has failed Rocha—there is much that could be said about his work in Africa and in Europe, for example. The recent publication of a selection of his writings translated into English (On Cinema

8 See Sarzynski, Revolution in the Terra do Sol: The Cold War in Brazil and Nemer, Glauber Rocha e a literatura de cordel: Uma relação intertextual.
9 See de Taboada, “Tercer Cine: Tres Manifestos”.

11
Using ecocriticism as a framework by which Glauber Rocha’s work can be productively brought into conversation with Hollywood Westerns is therefore a contribution to ecocritical studies, as well as Luso-Brazilian and American/Postwestern studies.

Glauber Rocha the firebrand critic, forged in the flames of Brazil’s burgeoning cineclub movement, viewed and wrote about a large variety of foreign films, including European art cinema (Godard, Fellini, Bertolucci, etc.) and Hollywood films (Chaplin, Ray, Fuller, etc.), offering valuable insight from a Brazilian perspective. Particularly interesting and relevant here are his numerous, sharp analyses of Hollywood Westerns and how these films worlded their worlds. Thanks to the international popularity of Westerns, Rocha had the opportunity to view a large number of them and seemed to take a particular interest in the genre, publishing several articles on directors who worked in the genre (Nicholas Ray, John Ford, Anthony Mann), on specific Western films (including The Searchers), and reflections on Westerns in general. Though he spent much of his time and energy toward developing Brazil’s film industry, these writings, many of which he published as a collection titled O Século do Cinema [The Century of Cinema], demonstrate that he conceived of Brazilian cinema as a complex dialectic of influences.

Rocha praised the Hollywood Western as “the first and only crystallization of the social aesthetic in American cinema” (152). As a political radical, he was naturally drawn to Westerns for their social and political scenarios—the fight against feudalism, the plight of the peasantry—but his writings also demonstrate an acute awareness of how Hollywood Westerns worlded and landscaped their setting, including the way that characters interacted with the wilderness. He was particularly
admiring of John Ford, who he described as the main figure responsible for the evolution and maturity of the Western. It was Ford who used the Western to “establish the fundamental principles of the influence of nature on man, of a man immersed and struggling in a developing society” (153). Rocha therefore sees in Westerns an exploration of the relationship between “nature” and “man,” a relationship that goes both ways, a reciprocally antagonistic relationship in which Man and Nature are at odds.

This attentiveness to representations of land and Nature in Hollywood Westerns seemed to inform his criticism of Brazilian cinema as well. Rocha noted a connection between Hollywood Westerns’ depictions of American wilderness and Brazilian films’ depictions of Brazilian wilderness, most notably in his critique of Lima Barreto’s famous and celebrated film O Cangaceiro [The Bandit] (1953), one of the largest and most renowned productions of the Brazilian film industry up to its time. Rocha was perhaps the loudest and most prominent critic of O Cangaceiro, using his position in the press to decry the film. One of the primary grounds of his critique was its bastardization of Brazilian wilderness. Rocha felt that Barreto Americanized the Brazilian landscape and presented it untruthfully, utilizing only the symbols which serve the Western plot—“big hats, aggressive landscapes, guns and horses, music and folk dance”—and thus turning the cangaceiro social bandits into shadows of cowboys while losing the authentic national context and significance in the process (76). One of Barreto’s worst crimes in Rocha’s eyes was worlding the Brazilian sertão through an “artificial technique” that “follows the American model,” thus recreating Brazil in the image of America—and, by implication, perpetuating the same colonial ecological philosophy (77).
Rocha was, therefore, a noteworthy and notorious critic, one attuned to the political implications of depictions of land. These critical writings naturally informed and were informed by his theorizing and filmmaking. Rocha’s anticolonial politics result in a radical rejection of the colonizing gaze in Hollywood Westerns that renders nature as Other. An examination of the cinematic techniques with which Rocha worlds the sertão therefore provides a useful comparison with the techniques utilized by John Ford in his landcaping of the American West.

The value of this transnational approach to the ecocritical project is its illumination of ecological thought’s aesthetic dimension. If the trouble with wildernesses is that they reify a binary opposition between Humans and Nature then we must think beyond the binary. The ecological philosophy that Timothy Morton outlines as “the ecological thought” sees everything as interconnected. The conception of Nature as a separate site “over yonder”—as a “reified thing in the distance, under the sidewalk, on the other side where the grass is always greener, preferably in the mountains”—is a comforting and addicting fantasy that serves as an ideological barrier to realizing how everything is interconnected (3, 99). If Hollywood Westerns through their landscapes and mode of production reify the concept of Nature as a site “over yonder,” then Cinema Novo offers a counter-aesthetic and alternative mode of production that dissolves those distinctions. The role that landscaping in Hollywood Westerns plays in inscribing a colonial desire to contain, transform, and tame the wilderness as exemplified in John Ford’s The Searchers will be contrasted against Brazilian Cinema Novo’s anticolonial “aesthetic of hunger,” as theorized by Glauber Rocha and practiced in his film Deus e o diabo na terra do sol.
From Wilderness to Landscape

So the dry, impressive wildernesses of the American West and the sertão are the terrains represented in Westerns and Cinema Novo films—the “world-in” the films—but films aren’t an objective, innocent recreation of their environments. Yacavone opens his book with the claim that “To make a film is also to construct a world” (xiii). Artists make choices in the construction of these worlds that betray ideology. Yacavone identifies some of the formal devices used in that construction as including “camera movements, color schemes, rhythms, editing styles, music, production design, performance registers, soundscapes” etc. (7-8). Inscribed in the film form then is an ideological gaze—the way that the world-of a Western film represents the land of its world-in reflects a colonial ideology, and Cinema Novo’s conscious dialogue with these representations utilizes formal elements differently to resist or reject this representation and its underlying ideology.

A focus on representations of land and nature is relatively new territory in film theory, and is ground that must be covered. The concept of “landscape” can’t be taken for granted, and deserves its own distinction: not every image or representation of land is a landscape, as illustrated by Martin Lefebvre’s attempts to tackle the question in Landscape and Film (2006), the first volume dedicated to the subject. Landscaping is a particular process, and representations of land as landscape are wrapped in ideology and questions of power, as W. J. T. Mitchell and others have demonstrated—landscapes “are not only selective but are never neutral in intention or reception” (Harper and Rayner 16). An

---

10 See also Mitchell’s Landscape and Power—“Landscape . . . doesn’t merely signify or symbolize power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power that is (or frequently represents itself as) independent of human intentions. Landscape as a cultural medium thus has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site” (2).
examination of the landscapes in *The Searchers* will illustrate these theoretical ideas and demonstrate how a colonial view is inscribed in its landscapes through film’s form, and then a transnational comparison to representations of the sertão in *O Cangaceiro* and *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* will further reveal and critique the connection between landscape and colonialism.

Though nearly any representation of events might be thought of as taking place in a “landscape,” returning to Lefebvre’s distinction between “landscape” and “setting” is important here. He finds that “even though ‘realist’ depictions of exterior scenes have always presupposed the presence of some kind of ‘landscape,’ these depicted exteriors were conceived as *marginalia* (*parergon*) next to the true subject matter of the work, i.e., the illustrated events or characters (*ergon*)” (23). For landscape to be “landscape,” the land can’t be backgrounded—it must be the true subject of an image. Land can’t be *parergon*, or subservient to narrative or characters—it must be *ergon*, the primary focus. Lefebvre’s definition of landscape is therefore “space freed from eventhood” (22). How could narrative cinema contain landscapes then, if narrative by default disqualifies nature from landscape status?

Lefebvre adapts Laura Mulvey to posit two modes of spectatorial activity: a “narrative mode” and a “spectacular mode” (29). He suggests that spectators oscillate between these two modes while viewing a film, watching a film at some points in the narrative mode, focusing on the story, and other times in the spectacular mode, turning attention more toward the cinematic spectacle. Ultimately, it is up to the spectator to “see” landscape in films—in some cases based on cues from the filmmakers, and other times of their own initiative or volition.
Lefebvre uses the term “intentional landscapes” to refer to representations of land which seem to be presented by a film for the purpose of being contemplated as a landscape. He describes this intentional landscaping process as “any strategy for directing the spectator’s attention toward the exterior space rather than toward the action taking place within it (regardless of whether the strategy is motivated diegetically)” (33). He goes on to discuss instances where landscaping isn’t necessarily “intentional”; in these instances of “impure” landscape, spectators might opt for a spectacular mode of spectatorship, thus choosing to focus on landscape over narrative. Despite the distinction, “intentional” and “spectator’s”/“impure” landscapes share an important similarity: they require the spectator to interpret them as landscape. Turning now to the analysis of representations of land in a Hollywood Western will illustrate these ideas. The opening sequence of virtually any film could be used in this analysis, but for a variety of reasons *The Searchers* will prove particularly useful: its status in the canon of Westerns which guarantees its continued relevance, the well-documented and marketed production of the film, Glauber Rocha’s published admiration for the film, and the iconic status of its opening shot (see figure 1).11

---

11 Another productive pairing would be the opening shots of *3:10 to Yuma* (1957) contrasted with *Vidas secas [Barren Lives]* (1963).
From black, a door opens to reveal majestic Monument Valley, framed by the log cabin’s entrance. A woman, the one who opened the door and thus our view onto the scene, stands in silhouette, looking out at the landscape. This composition alone—a frame within a frame, complete with a figure contemplating the landscape—would seem to invite the spectator to do likewise. But the famous shot doesn’t end here—the camera pushes forward through the door to follow the woman, a movement from indoors to outdoors that reveals even more of the landscape, opening up before our eyes like the curtains of a stage (see figure 2). The woman, her back still to us, continues to look out to the horizon, where a distant character can vaguely be seen emerging, diminished by the vast landscape.

The landscape is the setting for their story, but at this point, both characters are functionally parergon—with her back to us and his diminished scale, we haven’t seen either of them, and their primary function at this point in the film is to reveal the landscape. In this sense, the audience is introduced to the landscape before the characters. Though intrigued by the promise of narrative, the
spectator engages with the opening image in the spectacular mode of viewing. This is further reinforced by the first cut, in which we finally see the woman’s face, still looking out, and the following cut, which brings the approaching character slightly closer into view, but maintains a distance, instead emphasizing his smallness on the horizon and the magnificent features of Monument Valley. It only takes moments for him to arrive into view and for the relationship between landscape as parergon and characters as ergon to revert to their typical narrative roles, but the effect of this opening sequence is to prime the audience to see landscape—to foreground the background.

This active landscaping is no innocent act—as Harper and Rayner suggest, “Landscapes... are not only selective but are never neutral in intention or reception” (26). In *The Searchers’* selecting and foregrounding, the film formally exercises control over the land, containing it, exoticizing it, and therefore presenting it with a colonizing perspective. The frame-within-a-frame of the door and the porch amounts to a visual representation of the conception of wilderness that Cronon and Morton bemoan, one that cues the audience to see nature as something “out there.” Although this opening sequence is particularly loaded with significance, it’s hardly an isolated incident, but rather an establishing shot that sets a precedent throughout the film, mirroring a tendency that can be seen in Ford’s other films, and indeed in Hollywood Westerns at large. The movie is punctuated by similar shots throughout, repeatedly invoking landscape in order to formally assert dominance over it. Shots are composed to emphasize the unique characteristics of the terrain while diminishing the human figures. The wilderness may be vast and overwhelming, and the narrative may frame it as uninhabitable, but John Ford (and other Western filmmakers for that matter) use the medium to capture images that frame the land as landscape, as beautiful, even sublime. Despite the challenge the desert land poses
narratively, and its apparent dominance over humans based on the shot scale, which regularly
diminishes human figures, the colonizing gaze is manifest not only in the narrative—which presents the
land as always, ultimately, conquerable—and not only the framing as landscape—which contains the
land as beautiful and therefore desirably conquerable—but also in the juxtaposition of manmade order
upon the landscape: images of trails cut through the desert terrain, orderly lines of frontiersmen and
cavalry soldiers contrasting against the wildness of the wilderness.

Lefebvre himself also makes special note of Ford’s use of Monument Valley and how this choice
of filming location—a choice which the director made nine times, for different projects with stories set
in different locations—demonstrates an interest in the landscape and space over the narrative and
draws the spectator to view it as landscape over setting. Ford uses the southern Utah, northern Arizona
land of Monument Valley to stand in for various southwestern settings in different films, such as
southern Arizona and southern New Mexico in Stagecoach (1939); Tombstone, Arizona in My Darling
Clementine (1946); and Texas in The Searchers (1956) (49). So Ford had no regard for geographic
plausibility when using Monument Valley as the setting between his movies, and even within a given
movie seems to have little care for maintaining spatial or geographic continuity, with shots
painstakingly composed to highlight the most dramatic rock formations of the location. Surely these
distinctive features of Monument Valley are what kept drawing Ford back to the place, and are a
significant factor of what make his movies so memorable. Ford’s choice of Monument Valley illustrates
an interest in landscape and space above and beyond the story—the landscape isn’t subservient to the
narrative, but perhaps the other way around. For John Ford, Monument Valley functions as more than
mere setting—it is a landscape.
*The Searchers* famously ends by bookending the film, inverting its famous beginning—silhouetted characters on the porch, the doorway framing the landscape. The camera pulls back as the family disappears offscreen into the house, leaving John Wayne’s Ethan Edwards to head off into the distance, back toward the horizon. As demonstrated, the spectator has likely switched between narrative and spectacular viewing modes throughout the film, but ergon and parergon are once again deliberately reversed—with the loss of the characters and their narrative, what remains is the landscape, again visually and metaphorically contained within the frame of the cabin built by the frontier settlers, until the door swings shut. From beginning to end, *The Searchers* offers a colonizing view, a view of the land as outside, separate, and conquerable, a perspective which constructs landscapes out of land and asks the spectator to do the same.

Cinema Novo’s anticolonial ideology offers an alternative aesthetic approach to the representation of land. In his rejection of a colonial aesthetic, Glauber Rocha posited a new theory for Brazilian cinema: an “aesthetic of hunger” that embraced the disorderliness and frequent ugliness of the sertão instead of trying to impose order on it. Rocha’s theory anticipates Timothy Morton’s call for a “dark ecology” by nearly a half century—a call for a more expansive ecological thought which embraces “negativity, introversion, femininity, writing, mediation, ambiguity, darkness, irony, fragmentation, and sickness” and which “unsettles and disgusts,” a call that has conceptual affinity with Rocha’s work (16). In theory and in practice, Rocha’s aesthetic of hunger responds to the colonial aesthetic of Hollywood Westerns that landscape the Western wilderness.
That Glauber Rocha’s films are in dialogue with Hollywood Westerns is evident in a comparison between his films and his own writings about the genre as a critic. He identified characteristics that he saw as intrinsic to the genre: “fundamental themes” which comprised the classic, even “compulsory structure” of the genre—as essential as “quartets or trios in sonnets”—such as the opening, narrative ballad; the solitary rider; a gun duel in a dusty street followed by a departure (155); a solitary, good-hearted bandit (156); the “tried and tested opening scenes” of a “yellow landscape against a blue sky” (157)—characteristics with which he dialogued in his own work. The connection he drew between the Western aesthetic and land was demonstrated earlier, particularly in his critique of Lima Barreto’s *O Cangaceiro* as a bastardization of Brazilian culture and land. While admiring the Hollywood aesthetic, he clearly saw problems with it, particularly when applied to Brazilian circumstances.

A brief analysis of the opening sequence of Barreto’s *O Cangaceiro* illustrates Rocha’s criticisms of the film and its approach to representations of wilderness, and also provides for an interesting comparison with *The Searchers* and contrast with *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol*. Barreto’s film begins with classic Hollywood Western imagery: a picturesque sunrise, an orderly line of wide-brimmed hat-wearing figures crossing the frame on horseback, trees and vegetation.
providing compositional balance (see figure 3). Silhouetted, these elements are reduced to icons, shadows of their Hollywood forms. Even in a higher resolution screengrab, it would be difficult to differentiate this isolated image from a shot in a Hollywood Western. In fact, in Brazil, it initiated a sub-genre of films that came to be known as “Nordesterns”—films set in the northeastern sertão that enter into dialogue with Western imagery, the same dialogue into which Glauber Rocha enters critically with his own films. The rest of Barreto’s movie similarly takes cues from Hollywood Westerns, resulting in a similar aesthetic and similar colonial ecological ideology.

Perhaps it’s no surprise that Brazilian land presented in the image of America, reflecting familiar and comforting ecological philosophies, was widely popular and critically acclaimed. O Cangaceiro played at the Cannes Film Festival in 1953 where it won an award for best adventure movie and was also the first Brazilian film to secure international distribution (Sadlier 234). Bosley Crowther’s 1953 New York Times review of the film further demonstrates how audiences of the time saw it in relation to Hollywood Westerns. Crowther not only makes the genre connection right off the bat (calling it a “glorified South American ‘western’”) and draws a connection between the worlds-in the film (“the country is dry and dramatic, like some of our own Western locales”), he also demonstrates the spectacular mode of viewing films by acknowledging the deficiencies of the narrative while praising the scenery: “while conventional as to dramatic plot, has some of the most powerful pictorial framing of brutal happenings that has been seen since [Eisenstein’s Qué Viva Mexico!].” Crowther’s review therefore illustrates landscaping in action, as the critic chooses to focus not on “the story, which is obvious and pat,” but on the “vigor and beauty of this raw outdoor film” in which the “Latin director has found moments of beauty and poetry in some of the small things in this picture—a
shot of a cactus against the sky... of a silhouette of a file of horsemen against the sun.” Crowther concludes that “This ‘Cangaceiro’ is a picture that will cause the Western fans to rub their eyes”—presumably in rapture of the sublime imagery, which he seems to suggest not only borrows but surpasses the Hollywood Western aesthetic, though the eye-rubbing also unwittingly but correctly predicts Glauber Rocha’s weariness at the film and its reactionary aesthetics and politics.

This look at O Cangaceiro demonstrates the state of Brazilian cinema at the time, subservient to North American aesthetics and ideologies, including philosophies toward Nature and land. As a theorist, Rocha therefore posited a new theory for a new Brazilian cinema, a Cinema Novo, one that aims to “unsettle and disgust.” It is for this manifesto outlining his theory of an “estética da fome”—an “aesthetic of hunger”—that Rocha is most well-known. The theory complemented emerging manifestos of Third Cinema and characterized the early Cinema Novo films, including his own.

The aesthetic of hunger manifesto arose from a need to address the state of Brazilian arts, which Rocha criticized as merely passing lies as truths. Interestingly, these “lies” were not (necessarily or exclusively) a problem of content, but particularly one of form, as Rocha focuses on the issue being “social problems conveyed through formal exoticism,” suggesting that the films of his contemporaries were not only ill-suited for addressing the political and social problems of an underdeveloped nation, but fundamentally unable to do so at all (41). This is a problem of worlding—an exoticizing worlding of the underdeveloped Brazilian reality is essentially incapable of truthfully conveying social problems. The resulting misunderstandings are problematic in a way not solely limited to the sphere of art and culture, but also and “above all contaminate the entire political terrain” (41). Like Cronon, like Morton, like Yacavone, Rocha therefore sees a close relationship between art and politics, and believes
in the power of art to enact affective and cognitive change. If the problem is “formal exoticism,” to enact this change requires a change at the level of form, a change in the way that films “world.”

Rocha characterizes the problem of Brazilian cinema as producing a comfortably “digestive cinema”: in other words, “films featuring wealthy people, in beautiful homes, driving luxury cars; happy, amusing, fast-paced, but ultimately meaningless films, made with purely industrial objectives in mind” (43). He writes that despite hunger, poverty, and other aspects of underdevelopment being a social reality of Brazil, Brazilians see their hunger as a source of national shame. Rocha suggests that a cinema of “miserabilism” can combat the effects of this “digestive cinema”—that only a culture of hunger can oppose it. It is in this context that he outlines his “aesthetic of hunger,” proposing the need for “ugly, sad films,” “screaming, desperate films” with a “heightened commitment to portraying the truth” (43-44). A “cloak of Technicolor”—signifying colorful, fanciful, big-budget blockbusters—doesn’t just hide the “physical evidence of this disease,” but exacerbates the problem (44).

The aesthetic of hunger pulls back the Technicolor cloak by worlding the sertão in a consciously different way, marking a distinct aesthetic choice. This is evident in looking at the filmography of Brazilian directors who were working prior to the Cinema Novo movement. Though some filmmakers, such as Rocha, began their careers in the Cinema Novo movement, other prominent directors such as Nelson Pereira dos Santos (director of Vidas secas, one of the first major films of the movement) had successful careers preceding it. A comparison between even similarly politically and socially conscious films such as Rio, 40 graus (1955); Rio, Zona Norte (1957); and Vidas secas (1963), immediately makes apparent Pereira dos Santos’ deliberate formal choices to world the sertão according to a bleak, ugly, harsh aesthetic of hunger. But perhaps none crystallized the aesthetic so much as the
manifesto’s author and theorist himself. Glauber Rocha didn’t posit his aesthetic of hunger from an ivory tower—he was not just a passionate critic and thinker, but equally zealous as a filmmaker who put his ideas into practice, aiming to create “ugly, sad films” that fit right in line with Morton’s idea of a dark ecology that “unsetsles and disgusts.” With 1964’s *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* he made such a film—one of Cinema Novo’s defining and most enduring statements.

*Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* tells the story of Manuel, a sertanejo ranch hand, and his wife Rosa. They live together on the periphery of society—Manuel herds cattle while Rosa works at home, grinding flour. When Manuel confronts his dishonest boss about his mistreatment, a conflict breaks out, causing the exploitative landowner to beat Manuel, provoking a response in which Manuel ends up killing him. Manuel and Rosa flee, and the rest of the movie is divided into two episodes, each centered around a figure they meet while wandering in the sertão: the messianic figure Sebastião, the “Black God” of the English title, whom the couple follows for a spell; and the “White Devil” Corisco, a cangaceiro or social bandit. Both of these figures meet early (though not untimely) deaths, and the film ends with the couple running toward the sea prophetically promised by Sebastião.

The embeddedness of the characters within their environment is apparent from the opening shots, and the story is driven by their dependence on the land and on the complex web of human relations that mediates the land and impacts their ability to get what they need to survive. Ownership over land and animals is a question that looms large over the first section of the movie: “Maybe next year we can have a harvest of our own,” Manuel hopefully tells Rosa. “You have no right to even a single cow,” says Manuel’s boss, the landowner, shortly before the violent altercation that ends in his death.
Even in this regard, Deus e o diabo clearly distinguishes itself from “digestible” cinematic treatments of the sertão such as O Cangaceiro and the more simplistic plots of American westerns.

Still more significant is the formal aspect of the film, how Rocha utilizes his theory of an aesthetic of hunger in the worlding of the sertão. An analysis of the opening shot makes for a productive comparison with The Searchers and O Cangaceiro. While Ford’s film begins (and ends) with the magnificent Monument Valley landscape, compositionally set within frames that dramatize the landscaping spectacular mode (while further materially demonstrating a colonial gaze due to the frontier settlement providing the physical frame within the frame), Deus e o diabo na terra do sol begins with a minute and a half long tracking shot that provides an unrelenting aerial view of the unpicturesque arid land (see figure 4). By foregrounding an aspect of the world-in the film, Rocha makes it an important part of the world-of the film—a formal technique Yacavone calls filmic weighting or emphasis (93).

Yacavone explains that, through a deliberate choice of framing, camera movement, shot scale, etc. “a film can bring something to our explicit attention within the framed image, and within the represented and fictional reality of a work, that would not normally be so ‘selected’ (i.e., noticed, emphasized, or otherwise accorded special importance) in
everyday life-experience or, indeed, in other films” (94). In this opening shot, the sertão is not a backdrop, but is brought unavoidably front and center to the viewer’s attention—not parergon, or subservient to narrative events, but ergon, the primary and sole subject. In contrast with The Searchers, Rocha doesn’t frame or contain or impose order on the land—rather, he makes a point of exhibiting its boundlessness. The high, aerial angle from which the sertão is filmed makes the landscape fill the entire screen, extending infinitely in either direction with no horizon or escape in sight. A lesser framing might diminish the impact of this opening sequence, but Rocha cleverly shapes it for maximum effect. The choice to open with this shot makes it all the more significant for forcing the viewer to confront the setting of the film. The meaning of every shot which follows bears the trace of this opening shot.

There are additional aspects of the film’s cinematography which contribute to its worlding of the sertão via the aesthetic of hunger. One notable element is overexposure, particularly in capturing the sun-bleached landscape. The camera captures a land burned by the sun, overexposed and shot on cheap film stock that fails to render light and shadow in all of the values of the spectrum, reducing the image to only the brightest and darkest tones. The camera is often handheld throughout the film, creating a sense of instability and uneasiness, an amateur quality. This handheld camera’s movement through the wilderness suggests an embeddedness by evoking embodiedness, drawing attention to the physical presence of the camera in the physical setting in a way that Hollywood Westerns’ more objective, invisible cameras seem to avoid. The film in these ways embraces a darkly ecological aesthetic of ugliness.

In terms of editing, ordering, sequencing, Rocha doesn’t make extensive use of standard Hollywood film language and techniques such as cutaways or point of view shots. The effect of this
choice is that instead of suturing the viewer into a scene to be passively and distractedly swept up in the conversation or action, it forces the viewer to consider the environment in which scenes are taking place, recognizing the characters’ and camera’s embeddedness in nature as opposed to the landscaping colonial gaze. Even when cutting in a relatively conventional manner, Rocha lets scenes linger longer than is standard, again to the effect of drawing attention to the environment. Consider for example an extended two minute long scene in which Manuel and Rosa grind cassava. The scene does nothing to forward the plot, contains no dialogue, merely demonstrates the arduous process for a grueling two minutes—the type of scene that would surely be left on the cutting room floor in the editing of a more commercial film, if it was even deemed worthy of filming in the first place. Yet the scene contributes significantly to the worlding of the sertão in the film by depicting characters interacting with the environment in a realistic way: this is the aesthetic of dark ecology. Through editing, ordering, and pacing as well, then, Glauber Rocha’s aesthetic of hunger also has the effect of bringing the viewer back to the question of environment, to think ecologically.

Thanks to his critically-informed theoretical background, as a filmmaker Glauber Rocha avoids the romanticizing, exoticizing, landscaping, colonizing form of “digestible cinema” and instead achieves a uniquely anticolonial cinematic worlding of the sertão which draws attention to the ugly aspects of the environment and dissolves the binary conception of nature as something separate and distinct from humankind.

Conclusion

Studying Rocha’s films as praxis invites a consideration of the works not only as texts, but also as products of a specific mode of production which itself is a product of and producer of an ideology.
From the perspective of film production or consumption, it’s important to recognize that, due to the distinctively ecological nature of film production, films’ ecological philosophies are communicated not only through the film text, but also through the way they were created. Even without an ecological perspective inscribed in the film form, a film’s production practices reveal its ideology. Hollywood’s mode of producing westerns represents a combative relationship with nature that bears a reflexive nature with the subject matter of the films, just as Rocha’s Cinema Novo reflects its aesthetic and ideological embeddedness in nature with a neorealist production approach. *The Searchers* therefore not only represents a colonial view of Nature, but in its production itself constitutes a colonial attitude. The production of any western can be seen as a sort of battle against nature, and promotional material for *The Searchers* emphasized this aspect of it. This paratextual information influences the way that audiences experience it, and draws out a colonial metanarrative in the film.

The television program *Warner Bros. Presents* offers a look at how this colonial relationship with nature in the production of westerns was a selling point for the films themselves. The series was Warner Bros. first foray into television, a cross-marketing attempt to attract an audience of movie lovers to watch Warner Bros. TV programs and to get television audiences into theaters to see Warner Bros. movies. The show consisted of episodic dramas and wraparound segments, the most significant of which is the “Behind the Camera” segment, which offered audiences a rare behind-the-scenes look at film production. One of the first films featured in this “Behind the Camera” segment is *The Searchers*, making this Western one of the first large-scale attempts to document and show the general public the process of the production of a major Hollywood film. The behind-the-scenes look at *The Searchers* functions as a narrative itself, one that lays bare Western filmmaking’s colonial relationship to nature by
emphasizing the distance of the filming location, the backwardness of these remote places, and
underlines the man vs nature metanarrative in the film.12

In his introduction to the “Behind the Camera” spotlight on *The Searchers*, host Gig Young
promises audiences that they’ll “not only see the cast at work against one of America’s most spectacular
scenic backgrounds,” but that they’ll also “relive an even larger story of how *The Searchers* company
brought roads into a wilderness where roads have never existed (“The Searchers: Behind the Camera”).
In this crowd-teasing marketing, therefore, it is not only the promise of majestic landscapes by which
Warner Bros. hoped to attract viewers, but also the promise of a metanarrative—a “larger story” of the
war waged against nature, a story that stands on its own while also functioning as a paratext that
highlights similar themes in the filmic text. Gig Young makes these connections explicit as he continues
to create anticipation with the promise that “You’ll see how pioneers from Hollywood brought
electricity into the trackless Navajo country to light a complete city, with facilities for feeding and
housing almost 300 people.” By calling the production crews “pioneers,” Young not only draws a
comparison between the filmmakers and their subject matter, but also demonstrates an environmental
colonialist perspective in the process, hoping that audiences will delight in seeing titans of industry
bestow the gift of electricity upon the backward, remote, exotic, “trackless Navajo country.” This
behind-the-scenes documentary is sold on the same level as the film it advertises—“I think when you see

12 See Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*: “These semiotic features of landscape, and the historical narratives they
generate, are tailor-made for the discourse of imperialism, which conceives itself precisely (and simultaneously) as
an expansion of landscape understood as an inevitable, progressive development in history, an expansion of
‘culture’ and ‘civilization’ into a ‘natural’ space in a progress that is itself narrated as ‘natural.’ Empires move
outward in space as a way of moving forward in time; the ‘prospect’ that opens up is not just a spatial scene but a
projected future of ‘development’ and exploitation” (17).
it in full,” Young promises, “you’ll agree that it’s no more to be missed than *The Searchers* itself.” Part of what Warner Bros. hoped to sell audiences, then, is the story of man versus nature.

In contrast, Cinema Novo’s aesthetic of hunger lends itself—both out of practical necessity and ideology—to a neorealist production practice. While John Ford constructed cities in Monument Valley, Glauber (and his Cinema Novo peers) evidently used existing settings and opted to use non-actors for all but the lead roles. Although there is an unfortunate dearth of promotional material, behind the scenes footage, or interviews to shed light on the production of these films, perhaps the absence of man versus nature metanarratives is telling in itself—at any rate, it is clear in the films’ settings that Cinema Novo filmmakers didn’t participate in colonizing metanarratives, but rather saw themselves as embedded in the environments in which they filmed.

In their worlding of the Old West and the landscaping of the American desert, Hollywood Westerns such as *The Searchers* privilege the picturesque over narrative and therefore offer colonizing images of the land which reify Nature as separate and distinct from humankind, further reinforced by the metanarrative of Western productions that emphasize on-location filmmaking as a battle against Nature and a struggle to bring modern technologies to the “Wild West.” The worlding of the sertão in Cinema Novo films such as *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* puts Brazilian cinema in dialogue with Hollywood Westerns—Glauber Rocha’s aesthetic of hunger is not only a rejection of a Hollywood aesthetic, but also the underlying ideologies inscribed in its images. If Hollywood Westerns promote a colonial attitude toward Nature, Rocha’s aesthetic of hunger is decidedly anti-colonial; by extension, Morton’s project of an “ecological thought” is anti-colonial. Glauber Rocha’s aesthetic of hunger and the way that it worlds the sertão offers one model of how art—and especially cinematic art—can
promote ecological thinking. This project offers ecocritics and film scholars alike a new lens through
which to study films—one which seeks to dissolve disciplinary boundaries—and filmmakers a new way
of thinking consciously about how they represent the environment and the implications that these
representations might have.
Works Cited


Filmography


O Cangaceiro. Directed by Lima Barreto, Vera Cruz, 1953.