LANDSCAPE ALLEGORY IN CINEMA

FROM WILDERNESS TO WASTELAND

DAVID MELBYE

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From Wilderness to Wasteland

David Melbye

This study seeks to understand the form of cinematic space referred to as "the landscape of the mind," in which natural, outdoor settings serve as outward manifestations of characters' inner subjective states.

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Introduction

Defining Landscape Allegory

When watching narrative films, we normally devote our attention to character presence and interaction rather than the settings or back-grounds. Accordingly, cinematic locations serve as backdrops for characters that shape the story on their own. Consider Hollywood epics like Richard Fleischer's *The Vikings* (1958), William Wyler's *Ben Hur* (1959), or Henry Levin's *Genghis Khan* (1965): the magnificent locations do little more than set the stage for these films' grand narratives. But setting can also have a psychological dimension functioning beyond the supportive role of backdrop. Filmmakers are able to manipulate the film's setting in order to reflect inner subjective states of the principal character or protagonist. Once a film has established a more complex psychological premise for any main character, it can correlate this individual's mental universe to natural outdoor locations specifically through a more aggressive approach to framing, editing, and juxtaposition. In the same way that Robert Wiene's German Expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) suggests its narrator's insanity through contorted interior sets, certain films use outdoor locations to express their protagonists' internal conflicts. This book focuses on the cultural forces that allow natural landscapes in cinema to behave like an assembled *Caligari* set. These "landscapes of the mind" define a particular approach to cinematic space in which natural, outdoor settings serve as *outward* manifestations of characters' troubled psyches.

This study pursues a fundamental question on the use of natural landscapes in narrative cinema: At what point precisely does a landscape setting function psychologically, beyond its usual role as backdrop? The intention here is to demonstrate that a clear line can be drawn between the normal, supportive use of landscape as backdrop and the more experimental use of landscape as an *allegorical* component to film narrative. Philosopher and film theorist Gilles Deleuze defines experimental cinema as a "double composition" or blending

of “physical cinema” (defined by everyday action) and “intellectual cinema” (defined by the imitation of mental activity).¹ In this context, “experimental” confers the cinematic attempt to depict not only actual human events within natural outdoor settings, but psychological events *through* these settings as well. In the most obvious sense, the line between normal and experimental derives from a film’s basic narrative intentions.

Typically, narrative cinema seeks little more than to entertain its audience with an engaging story. However, there are certain films whose narratives move decidedly into this experimental realm—in the deliberate juxtaposition of their psychologically complex characters with carefully selected, framed, and edited natural landscapes. It is the specific nature of this juxtaposition I consider here since it is more than the deliberate foregrounding of landscape in Hollywood historical epics or in landscape-oriented westerns like John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939) or Budd Boetticher’s *The Tall T* (1957). While narrative setting in these two westerns, for example, becomes a locus of cultural investment even to the point of frontier mythmaking, the natural landscape’s psychological meaning in experimental films is pushed even further. In the latter case, filmmakers exploit these settings moreover by manipulating their natural features into an outer macroscopic reflection of inner transformations. The landscapes of our natural world become landscapes of our minds.

The transformation of space in general into a place of specific meanings is inherently a social phenomenon. In discussing how space is mythologized, landscape theorists like J.B. Jackson and Yi-Fu Tuan affirm that the mere presence of humankind makes an otherwise mute landscape “speak” and that the language of each landscape is idiosyncratic to the body or nation of people in a position to confront it, depending on how it figures in their common experience and imagination. This collective interpretation of the environment is a significant part of what we refer to as *culture*. Consequently, a landscape’s meaning may vary drastically from one culture to the next, and, at the same time, may be universal. In his study *Interpretations of the Ordinary Landscape*, Donald Meinig explains this concept as follows:

We regard all landscapes as symbolic, as expressions of cultural values, social behavior, and individual actions worked upon particular localities over a span of time. Every landscape is an accumulation, and its study may be undertaken as formal history, methodically defining the making of the landscape from the past to the present.²

But landscapes also become meaningful when they are outside a particular culture's everyday experience. For example, Robert Flaherty's 1922 documentary *Nanook of the North* exploited the home of indigenous Eskimos in the remote Hudson Bay region for the consumption of American audiences who invested this icy peripheral zone with a sense of wonderment. While a landscape may remain constant (excepting, of course, where natural resources are to be found), its figurative meanings are ever changing according to the inherent mutability of human cultural presence. Even an inhospitable wasteland may be retained and live on in the collective imagination of societies that have left it for more habitable regions—or simply observe it from a safe distance. Once a natural landscape has become encoded with meanings specific to a particular culture, this landscape can come to symbolize something beyond itself to the people who make up that culture. That is, it takes on an *allegorical* dimension.

There should be some clarity as to what is meant here by “allegory” or “allegorical” within a visual context. Angus Fletcher, an authority on the literary use of this concept, defines it as follows: “In the simplest terms, allegory says one thing and means another. It destroys the normal expectation we have about language, that our words ‘mean what they say.’”³ Because this study focuses on how cinematic space can also “say one thing and mean another,” I shall define a cinematic allegory as an assembled narrative mode, wherein the principal characters move beyond their normal protagonist/antagonist functions and into a symbolic dimension of meaning. Cinematic allegories usually have a narrower range of characters, each connoting a specific meaning or idea. Such narratives invite a second interpretation beyond the immediately visible world that is otherwise sufficient in more conventional films to entertain an audience.

Audiences do not interpret cinematic allegories on a case-by-case basis. Instead, a cultural lexicon allows audiences to recognize filmmakers' deeper intentions beneath the narrative's surface. By the same token, our larger understanding of allegory derives from visual paradigms that have evolved over an extended period of time to achieve their present cultural currency. In his discussion of the allegorical mode in a postmodern context, Craig Owens affirms this notion of evolution: “Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter.”⁴ According to this idea of the “culturally significant,” an allegorical film communicates meanings to its targeted audience beyond what

other audiences may be in a position to perceive. This applies to the earlier notion of how the specific meaning of any natural landscape varies from culture to culture, and so resonates uniquely within the collective imagination or experience of a given nation. In certain cases, even another nation's experience within a certain characteristic landscape can become meaningful to a nation whose topography is totally dissimilar. For example, in Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966) and similar Italian reinterpretations of the Hollywood western, the characteristic desert wastelands of the American frontier become arenas for a critique of modern Italian urbanization and social alienation. Ultimately, both characters and their surroundings can be manipulated to serve an allegorical mode of narration.

What is the real purpose of allegory? With its conflation of human beings and natural phenomena, Greco-Roman mythology set a complex precedent. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, human characters transform into trees, stones, or other features of the landscape. In the First Book, for example, the nymph Daphne defies Cupid's anger by becoming a laurel tree, and the nymph Syrinx resists the advances of Pan by turning herself into reeds. In the medieval period, allegory specifically served to address taboo subjects that were inappropriate for open discussion or literal contextualization within Christian society. One such subject was eroticism. Allegories such as *Roman de la Rose* (circa 1237) and Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* (1383) reveal a sophisticated system of figurative innuendoes borrowed from the natural universe. In depicting garden scenes, the former poem uses the image of a rosebud to refer to love and sexual copulation, while the latter portrays a series of birds seeking mates. Although somewhat opaque to modern readers, this language of flora and fauna was accessible to readers of the time because it had evolved slowly from Greco-Roman examples.

Political issues were also prone to forms of indirect critique. For example, the continuation of the first part of *Roman de la Rose* by Jean de Meun (1240?-1305?) expands the allegory with a wealth of outside references, such as the story of Pygmalion from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in order to satirize various aspects of contemporary society. Fletcher refers to this kind of narrative as "Aesop-language," intended "to avoid censorship of dissident thought."⁵ The consummate political allegory is Dante's *Inferno* (1321), wherein the author encounters individuals from his political life in a subterranean landscape of torment and penance. For example, Filippo Argenti, a Florentine

member of the Black Guelph political faction and an enemy of Dante, accosts him as he crosses the river Styx in the poem. As late as the eighteenth century, political allegories such as Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) or *Zadig* (1747) continued to have popular appeal in Western culture. Their virulent attacks on oppressive political systems and religious attitudes attempted to escape censorship with the use of an indirect, allegorical mode of fiction still accessible enough to reach a wide audience. *Candide*, for example, demonstrates the folly of blind optimism through the global misadventures of its protagonist. Voltaire intended his allegory as an indictment of contemporary Enlightenment thinkers such as Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646 -1716) who argued that the world must be perfect since God created it.

Like earlier appearances of literary allegory, cinematic allegory derives from a cultural tendency toward social critique. A prolific period for such films can be associated with the 1960s and '70s, a period commonly characterized by an intense correlation between narrative experimentation and social consciousness in mainstream cinema. These years were a time of great cultural upheaval, not only in the United States and Europe, but globally as well. The aftermath of the Second World War saw an increasing trend toward cultural and political reexamination, as well as a reinterpretation of space. Jean-Francois Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Andreas Huyssen, Richard Murphy, Gilles Deleuze, and other theorists of the shift from modernism to postmodernism attest to this transformation. Deleuze describes the postwar "break":

The fact is that, in Europe, the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe. There were "any spaces whatever," deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction. And in these anyspaces-whatever a new race of characters was stirring, kind of mutant: they saw rather than acted; they were seers.⁶

As an example, Deleuze cites Italian director Roberto Rossellini's film *Stromboli* (1950). Specifically, its incorporation of a bleak volcanic landscape anticipates the psychological correlation between such landscapes and bourgeois caricatures in certain films of Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni. This latter director intended *L'avventura* (1960) and subsequent films more ostensibly as indictments of modern existence after World War II.

In the postwar era, technological advances in the worlds of both work (computers) and leisure (sports cars, speed boats) brought on a massive transformation of lifestyle within the increasingly urbanized spaces of reconstruction. During the 1960s, European and American student populations in particular were skeptical of these “improvements” and their ability to enhance the quality of life. Proceeding from the Frankfurt School’s conception of “late capitalism” (especially according to Adorno and Horkheimer), Fredric Jameson asserts that the real “preparation” for this period began in the 1950s and came to fruition in the “generational rupture” of the ’60s. He designates the year 1973 (“the oil crisis, the end of the international gold standard, for all intents and purposes the end of a great wave of ‘wars of national liberation’ and the beginning of the end of traditional communism”) as the official advent of a “new dynamic” of capitalism as well as a new cultural sensibility.⁷ Such was the kind of cultural climate that fostered films, and art in general, that takes a more pessimistic stance toward the state of the world at this time. This cultural defeatism reflected a growing disillusion with traditional Christian beliefs, political attitudes toward “Third World” nations, as well as modern society’s investment in technological advancement. Furthermore, the historic threat of government censorship established the incentive for less direct forms of social critique—especially allegory—regardless of specific national context. Just as the subject of eroticism was veiled in medieval Christian allegory, narrative cinema during this roughly 20-year period of aggressive cultural reevaluation encouraged deeper readings beyond the usual surface levels of audience engagement. Familiar characters, plots, and settings were manipulated to function as a condemnation of modern existence and the state of the world.

Within the context of what Deleuze refers to as modern cinema (or “time-image” films), the on-location activity of incorporating wastelands and other peripheral wildernesses was an indirect yet provocative strategy by which to critique modern, urbanized existence. In addition to the American desert, filmmakers used similar locations in Italy, Spain, Mexico, and other bleak terrains for this purpose. Antonioni, for example, not only exploited his own country’s inhospitable islands of the Mediterranean, but also sought out locations in California’s Death Valley and Africa’s Sahara Desert for his allegories of spiritual disillusionment. Beyond functioning as supportive backdrops, these landscapes become characters unto themselves, establishing a notion of resistance toward the obsessive will of these films’ protagonists. Within this paradigm of psychological struggle,

the landscape-as-antagonist approach also established a historical arena for the reexamination of Europe and America's imperialistic histories. In this context, certain films depict a male protagonist as a characteristically "Western" megalomaniac, who struggles against the landscape itself in an attempt to discover the limitations of his own obsessive will to power. Examples of this latter allegorical paradigm are Luis Buñuel's *Robinson Crusoe* (1954), David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), Richard Brooks' *Lord Jim* (1965), Werner Herzog's *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (1972), John Huston's *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). This period of experimental, intellectual, and pessimistic filmmaking ultimately gave way to a more escapist, surface-level approach to entertainment in accordance with an increasing cultural complacency. But before it faded, this period produced a number of allegorical films wherein the natural landscape is integral to the narrative. This body of films effectively demonstrates the potential for natural settings to transcend their supportive function as a backdrop for human events.

Beyond simply a technique of cinematic allegory, landscape allegory establishes a wider conceptual link between space and popular culture. It is the topography of our minds' innermost thoughts projected upon the natural universe around us. But such a narrative mode did not suddenly arrive with the cinema of the 1960s and '70s. Instead, it has a long aesthetic tradition in the pre-cinematic media of both painting and literature. The history of Western painting alone is sufficiently vast to complicate the notion of landscape allegory, and one period's understanding of how landscapes are meaningful is quite different from another's. For example, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of how vast, mountainous landscapes could invoke emotions of sublime exultation help to distinguish this period from previous eras. Nevertheless, both the European and American cultural demand for painted natural landscapes, especially as an independent subject, evolved and eventually translated into both early photography and cinema. Literature, too, allegorized the landscape in ways that became paradigmatic for narrative cinema. While landscape allegory should really be associated with late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of Romanticism, it is worthwhile to trace landscape depiction farther back to learn how the natural landscape became such a powerful reflection of occidental sensibilities. These various pre-cinematic appearances of landscape allegory alert us to the numerous ways in which landscape can become figurative—and how many of these ways were assimilated

by both narrative and nonnarrative cinema in order to tell stories through the landscape itself.

Pre-Cinematic Appearance of Landscape Allegory

The first two chapters provide a historical foundation for landscape allegory in the films of the 1960s and '70s, as well as its earlier cinematic treatments. Although relatively few have explored the subject of landscape in cinema, countless scholars have considered the presence of landscape in both art and literature over the years. By surveying some of the more important of these studies, I hope to inform what I see specifically as the exploitation of natural landscape in cinema. Each study devotes attention to the treatment of natural landscape and how that treatment reflects the spiritual attitudes of the culture that produced these works of art. These studies affirm that pre-twentieth-century artistic and literary depictions of landscape negotiate religious ideology at some level, making it possible to detect a trajectory of faith across time. The larger implication of this cultural trajectory is a strong religious faith becoming increasingly abstract, eventually reaching a state of relative disillusionment in the twentieth century. Fortunately, the fluid presence of landscape in art leaves little room for the argumentative leaps one might otherwise be forced to make in affirming such an evolution.

Within this cultural trajectory of spiritual disillusionment, landscape allegory can be understood through two basic conceptual parameters. First, there is a diminishing emphasis on *anthropocentric* (human-centered) themes in the pictorial representation of natural landscapes. Second, there is a contradictory relationship between realism and abstraction, and this relationship informs the increasing attention to landscape as an independent subject. In the depiction of landscape in seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painting, for example, two seemingly divergent paths of realism and abstraction are traceable. But I prefer to see realism (or naturalism) as merely another form of abstraction in a larger context where these two cultural impulses are not so antithetical after all. That is, they are operating simultaneously. This sophisticated interplay between realism and abstraction in pre-cinematic depictions of landscape is just as relevant to the more photographic medium of cinema—and how natural landscapes may be similarly manipulated toward allegorical ends. Thus,

the initial chapters of this study establish a historical context to the prolific appearance of landscape allegory in the 1960s and '70s and how film-viewing audiences of this period were capable of reading such an encoded visual language. In other words, it is not enough to assume that filmmakers and their audiences arrive at the subject of landscape independent of its vast cultural heritage. At the same time, I would never insist any filmmaker observed or was influenced by a particular landscape example from the aesthetic past. Ultimately, the impact of yesterday's culture on the present operates well beyond a conscious level.

Though one might consider the earliest visual depictions of landscape in prehistoric art, I choose to begin with the painting of the medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque periods according to their established sense of nationhood. In these periodic contexts of national identity, I trace a cultural trajectory of landscape depiction in painting through the two basic parameters of shifting subject emphasis and its corresponding relationship between realism and abstraction. As evidenced in the significant art museums of Europe (Louvre, Hermitage, British National Gallery, Prado, Alte Pinakothek, Rijksmuseum, and others), the majority of works across roughly 500 years is religious in content. In the Middle Ages, painting was typically a form of religious affirmation or a medium through which to propagate Christianity, but it also became something to be collected and commissioned by royalty, nobility, and other members of the aristocracy. In either context, the landscape is more than a simple backdrop for biblical characters. Rather, it is idealized according to religious ideology and dogma. Certain paintings and triptychs of Hieronymus Bosch (circa 1450-1516), for example, demonstrate the medieval period's tendency toward this manufactured universe of spiritualized landscapes. For example, in his triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (circa 1504), the convoluted presence of mythical figures and fantastical creatures in this outdoor arena allows the natural landscape itself to become a living, breathing, thinking entity—a *human* phenomenon.

In the Renaissance and Baroque periods, I notice the advent and increasing presence of a nonreligious or secular landscape. Here, biblical themes are replaced with rural and agrarian scenes, and the landscape assumes a stronger role in the intended meaning of the work. Seventeenth-century Dutch landscape paintings are particularly suggestive of this shift in emphasis. For example, the painting *Winter Landscape* (1623) by Esaias van de Velde (1591-1630) depicts a familiar Dutch rural scene with peasants, a farmhouse, a river, and the

countryside beyond. Ultimately, such paintings are no less spiritual in content—the allegory actually becomes more sophisticated in its potential to communicate through abstraction. This digression from anthropocentric biblical content to portrayals of everyday experience compels a different kind of interpretation. Now, the spectator must learn to read the landscape *itself*, independent of the persons included within it. This transformation is a reversal in emphasis: previously, the spectator absorbed the content in the foreground first and then proceeded to the background, but in this latter context, the spectator acknowledges the background first and then considers the less important details of the foreground. Besides *Winter Landscape*, many other seventeenth-century Dutch landscape paintings of everyday agrarian life demonstrate this reversal in emphasis. In the painting *River Scene with Ruined Tower* (1637) by Jan van Goyen (1596 -1656), the crumbling edifice and people outside it in the foreground are treated vaguely enough to become merely elements in this painting's composite perspective of landscape for its own sake. Even the titles of these paintings reinforce their artists' new investment in the natural universe.

Across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the natural landscape reached a cultural pinnacle as an allegorical device in both European and American painting and literature. Specifically, the relationship between realism and abstraction in the treatment of landscape became more sophisticated than in previous periods. With the rise of German Romanticism, painters such as Caspar David Friedrich (1774 -1840) conveyed the presence of God through expansive landscapes, seascapes, or other natural wonders. To associate faith with the natural landscape, Friedrich inserted a crucifix into some of his wilderness depictions, which was actually considered irreverent in his time. Also in Friedrich's landscape depictions, the presence of a human onlooker invoked a notion of "sublime" realization. For example, in his *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (circa 1818), the observing wanderer has his back to us, and so emphasis is diverted to the grand spectacle in front of him—a significant departure from anthropocentric landscapes of the past. This inclusion of a subject seen from behind (referred to as a "*Rückenfigur*") was Friedrich's way of overtly establishing a human psychological association with the natural landscape. Again and again, he and other Romantic painters presented this form of contemplation as a spiritual alternative to churchgoing traditions.

American culture eventually assimilated European spiritualized visions of the natural landscape, but for Americans, the presence of

the onlooker was secondary to capturing the essence of the nation's uncharted wildernesses. In this latter context, the spiritual association with the landscape is retained, but the *Rückenfigur* is less prominent or is merely implied by what would be an overseeing onlooker's view of an expansive landscape. For example, in *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunder Storm (The Oxbow)* (1836) by Thomas Cole (1801-1848), the hilltop perspective of the vast surrounding landscape suggests how this actual wilderness appeared to the naked eye from this exact spot—at least at that time. Beginning with the work of Cole, the Hudson River School of American landscape painters became a powerful force toward expansionism and spiritual destiny. Similarly, American writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 -1882), Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804 -1864), Herman Melville (1819-1891), and especially Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) experimented with the natural landscape's allegorical potential. At the same time, these various attempts at landscape allegory were not always in favor of expansionism. For example, Cole's *Course of Empire* series (1834-1836), depicting the rise and fall of an idealized Greco-Roman civilization, was intended as a cautionary tale and so anticipates the "futureworld" landscape films discussed in chapter nine.

Landscape Allegory as an Avant-Garde Gesture

Chapters three and four examine the practice of filming the natural landscape, both in early experiments with on-location shooting and in the subsequent exploitation of outdoor settings in the experimental, intellectual, and defeatist films of the 1960s and '70s. In this context of mainstream filmmaking, the figurative use of natural landscapes suggests an unusual association with more peripheral avant-garde cinema and its subversive agenda. The term *avant-garde* implies a degree of resistance to mainstream commercial practices, and as Scott MacDonald affirms, the privileging of natural landscape in cinema was one such form of resistance:

That late-twentieth-century independent filmmakers often share an interest in landscape with nineteenth-century artists and writers is less surprising than it may seem, once one considers the development of American independent film and the emergence of academic film studies

during the 1960s and 1970s. For a good many filmmakers coming to maturity during those decades, a broad and penetrating cultural critique was essential. This critique was often directed at the commercialism of Hollywood, which was seen as a particularly visible index of the increasingly rampant materialism of capitalist culture.⁸

But MacDonald does not explain the fundamental shift from painting to film as the preferred medium for landscape. As painting became increasingly abstract in the twentieth century, photography and filmmaking took over the role of depicting natural scenery as it appears to the common observer. In other words, because photographic technology seemed better suited to satisfy a larger cultural desire for realistic representation, painting was freed up (or compelled) to pursue other avenues. After one considers the synthetic interior and exterior sets in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), one can then acknowledge a range of cinematic settings that reaches its opposite end with the documentary mode—in films such as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), also from the silent era. This latter film anticipates an increasingly popular desire for the semblance of authenticity, and it spawned a number of similarly contrived exotic landscape documentaries. In *Nanook*, the frozen tundra authenticates the world of the Eskimos with the same narrative impact that an oft-used landscape like Vasquez Rocks or the Alabama Hills provides in so many westerns. This privileging of authentic landscape locations, which first appeared in early European and American cinema and continued through the 1950s in Hollywood westerns, bridges the gap between nineteenth-century landscape painting and the avant-garde techniques of filming landscape in the 1960s and '70s.

Chapter four considers the narrative aspects of filming natural landscapes and the precise point at which outdoor cinematic spaces become allegorical. In the most fundamental sense, this point could be established by the framing of the landscape vis-à-vis the human characters depicted within it. However, even if a natural setting is predominant and the human figures appear as tiny or insignificant within it, this may not be allegorical. Otherwise, many westerns by Ford, Boetticher, and others would then seem to have allegorical intentions when they are really only harbingers of the more experimental films to come. Just as one can trace a trend of the western genre toward increasing authenticity, one can also trace the beginnings of experimentation with these natural settings toward a more psychological dimension. Anthony Mann's westerns, in particular,

reveal an allegorical intention behind rugged landscapes appearing in key moments of their protagonists' inner conflicts. For example, in *Winchester '73* (1950) Lin McAdam (James Stewart) confronts his darker instinct for revenge both literally and figuratively through a final gunfight with the film's antagonist in a rocky peripheral zone outside town. Because most of the film's action takes place in familiar frontier-town settings, this remote wilderness landscape takes on a deeper significance. The protagonist must struggle within it—and within himself—in order to confront and overcome his villainous brother. In the context of narrative cinema, a featured landscape only becomes allegorical according to this clearly established psychological dimension to the film's main characters. However, this is only an initial phase in the construction of landscape allegory. Filmmakers must also incorporate certain avant-garde techniques of framing, editing, and juxtaposition to fully confer a deeper meaning upon natural settings.

When considering avant-garde films as opposed to mainstream, profit-driven films, it is important to remember that avant-garde filmmakers mostly eschew any pressure to conform to narrative conventions. It is in this climate of unchecked experimentation or self-indulgence that the attempt to attribute meaning to the natural landscape realizes its greatest potential. Two filmmakers who worked within the wider psychologically probing impulse of the postwar period were Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage. Although these artists pursued different types of experimentation with the filmmaking process, they both recognized the natural landscape as fertile subject matter for their inner self-explorations. Like the positioned observer in Caspar David Friedrich's 1818 painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, these filmmakers insert themselves as the sole human presence within a rugged landscape. In the dynamic medium of film, of course, these solitary characters do not remain frozen in contemplation, but instead move across—and even struggle *against*—the landscape. This latter cinematic privilege of juxtaposing an active human presence with an inhospitable landscape, and then depicting the inherent struggle that ensues, became the most prominent device of landscape allegory to be assimilated by mainstream cinema in subsequent years. David Lean's immensely successful 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia* is an early example of this type of landscape allegory, and anticipates such big-budget Hollywood landscape allegories as John Huston's *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975) and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

Narrative Cinema's Assimilation of Landscape Allegory

Because the socially conscious, relatively pessimistic period of the 1960s and '70s was so prolific in its filmic experimentation with natural landscape, I devote five chapters entirely to films of this era—keeping in mind that these films still abide by a more conventional, feature-length narrative format. It is important to acknowledge that this period's tendency toward allegorical experimentation is a reflection of the culture at hand, and that both mainstream and underground cinemas are produced for an audience, whether it is popular or specialized. In other words, depending on the desires and tastes of the time, audiences may not be interested in interpreting a film beyond the literal surface of its narrative action. I characterize this period by an unusual confluence of mainstream and avant-garde practices. That is, I see a middle-ground cinema that engages in avant-garde practices while preserving a conventional storytelling agenda, and I also observe the use of similar experimentation in big-budget Hollywood films. It is not my intention to prove that Hollywood or other filmmakers actually sought out and viewed Deren's or Brakhage's underground film shorts. Rather, I would simply suggest that mainstream and other narrative cinemas experiment with landscape allegory—especially in the context of social critique—far more than in other periods.

A productive way to understand how mainstream narrative film modes experiment increasingly with landscape allegory over time is by considering the evolution of the Hollywood western. As shooting on location rather than on studio back lots became technically more feasible, the trend toward an enhanced semblance of authenticity appeared—for example, in panoramic westerns such as John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939). However, a more complex psychological dimension to the western narrative only becomes evident later when specific landscapes assume allegorical properties or, rather, become outward manifestations of characters' inner moral conflicts. More precisely, a “duel in the sun” allegory, in which the protagonist must confront and overcome the antagonist's personification of his darker side within a craggy landscape, can be found in several of Mann's westerns, including the aforementioned *Winchester '73* (1950), *Bend of the River* (1952), *The Naked Spur* (1953), and *The Far Country* (1954). This narrative approach anticipates a more sophisticated landscape allegory in existential westerns such as Monte Hellman's

1967 film *The Shooting*, in which the protagonist must confront his doppelganger within a similar concentration of large rocks and boulders.

Chapter five initiates a closer examination of the more experimental, intellectual, and defeatist cinema of the 1960s and '70s. Here, I focus on various national cinemas to reveal how specific cultural conditions beget an idiosyncratic interpretation of landscape. Just as the emergence of seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painting reflects a cultural divergence in religious practices, the nineteenth-century American assimilation of the European sublime depiction of landscape was tailored to American notions of westward expansionism. Italian cinema of the 1960s and '70s, in particular, reflects a national sensibility of spiritual reevaluation and crisis. Italian filmmakers in this period show a strong inclination to transform various desert landscapes, not always indigenous to Italy, into psychological wastelands. I locate the appearance and proliferation of the spaghetti western within this cultural tendency because these films transform a specifically American film genre into yet another allegorical indictment of Italian modernization. Additionally, more experimental Italian filmmakers such as Antonioni and Pier Paolo Pasolini feature desolate landscapes in their allegories of the modern psyche such as *Teorema* (1968), *Porcile* (1969), *Zabriskie Point* (1970), and *The Passenger* (1975).

Chapters five through nine also consider other feature film directors from Mexico, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Australia, among other nations, who experimented with landscape in similar ways while attempting to remain within conventional narrative bounds. These so-called art films constitute this marginalized middle ground between avant-garde films and big-budget Hollywood releases. Alejandro Jodorowsky's 1969 film *El Topo*, for example, borrows heavily from Italian director Sergio Leone's westerns, yet pushes the Mexican desert terrain beyond a notion of historical authenticity and into a realm of pure allegory, replete with references to Eastern mysticism and the occult. Where Nicholas Roeg's *Walkabout* (1971) and Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) establish conventional storylines, their aggressive handling of the Australian outback demands a deeper kind of engagement from audiences. It is useful to approach such films according to the type of landscape being allegorized, since the particularity of each landscape determines its specific cultural meaning. This study often categorizes landscape allegories according to their emphasis on deserts, mountains, rivers, jungles, seascapes, or outer space. For example, wasteland settings usually

confer notions of existential futility and spiritual disillusionment, whereas a river odyssey connotes a psychological transformation of some kind. At the same time, all these natural outdoor settings have the potential to convey notions of otherworldliness or exoticism.

Mainstream Allegories of Imperialist Politics

In chapters eight and nine, I focus on the consummate use of landscape allegory as a specific indictment of European, American, or, more generally, imperialist politics. Landscape allegories of this time typically critique modernization through portrayals of spiritual crisis. But this particular form of landscape allegory moves beyond a general notion of cultural disillusionment to offer a more pointed condemnation. Specifically, these films examine our historical inclination to conquer and exploit vulnerable “Third World” cultures (Middle Eastern, South American, African, and Asian) and their natural resources. The narrative juxtaposes a characteristically “Western” male protagonist with a harsh, exotic wilderness, and he eventually becomes engaged in some form of psychological struggle against the indigenous landscape itself. Through his megalomania, this character achieves a measure of influence over others who, for a time, see him as a god. According to this particular allegory, the indomitable landscape rebuffs this personification of empire through a series of natural obstacles, often leading to his demise. Rather than the indigenous folk associated with it, the natural landscape *itself* assumes the antagonist role in this allegory of occidental conceit. Audiences could read these hostile landscapes as the outward appearance of the protagonist’s struggling inner psyche, but this wilderness also behaves as an antagonist in the narrative as it lashes out against the megalomaniac and finally consumes him.

The directors who experimented with this particular landscape allegory were usually independent filmmakers. Still, some directors found themselves in a position to command huge and unprecedented budgets for similar narratives. Accordingly, this allegory of imperialism becomes a useful link between middle-ground landscape allegories and major Hollywood productions of the 1960s and ’70s. Again, a seminal example of a big-budget landscape allegory is *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), directed by David Lean, who generally strove for an allegorical handling of landscape in his films. This film’s historical

depiction of T.E. Lawrence's charismatic persona, combined with his spiritual connection to the landscape, anticipates subsequent Hollywood films wherein a similar character assumes control of indigenous military forces in order to realize his personal vision of power. Two further examples worth considering are John Huston's 1975 film *The Man Who Would Be King* and Francis Ford Coppola's 1976 Vietnam epic *Apocalypse Now*. Interestingly, both films are adaptations of turn-of-the-century narratives (although the latter relocates its megalomaniac character from the nineteenth-century Amazon jungle to the wartime jungles of Vietnam and Cambodia). Despite their obvious differences, these two films set up an identical allegory of imperialist politics and their consequences by way of a wilderness landscape that devours those attempting to play god within it. This landscape allegory of the "Western megalomaniac" pitted against an exotic wilderness and its native inhabitants can also be found a bit earlier in Luis Buñuel's *Robinson Crusoe* (1954), but it became prolific during the 1960s and '70s with films such as Werner Herzog's *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), as well as John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972).

Big-budget examples of this landscape allegory were relatively successful, seeming to strike a chord with popular audiences of the time. But these sorts of introspective films did not remain in vogue for long. The experimental handling of landscape settings faded from view as Hollywood filmmaking increasingly privileged special effects and shock value over introspective, allegorical narratives. I see this newer tendency as a larger transformation in audience tastes from an intellectually probing pessimism to an increasingly resigned mode of escapism. The simultaneous release in 1977 of William Friedkin's existentialist film *Sorcerer*, which flopped, and George Lucas' *Star Wars*, which remains a cultural phenomenon to this day, demonstrates this cultural breach. Nevertheless, *Sorcerer* shares many of the same narrative attributes as the more successful landscape allegories of the same period. In this film, the male protagonist, a former criminal, confronts a series of jungle obstacles in the attempt to deliver a truckload of nitroglycerin to a distant village—a task whose successful completion will win him a passport back to America. The surface-level adventure through this hostile wilderness becomes an inward allegorical journey into the protagonist's troubled psyche as he makes a futile attempt to discover his larger purpose. At one point, for example, his inner struggle is depicted through an aggressive superimposition sequence in which scenes from the protagonist's past

appear against anthropomorphic rock formations. While this film has achieved an art-house appreciation in recent times, its box-office failure reflects a popular dearth of interest in being asked to interpret allegorical content, especially in such a heavy-handed and defeatist context.

Continuation of Landscape Allegory

Landscape allegory may seem like a passing phase in conventional narrative cinema, but continued experimentation with natural landscape still appears in recent avant-garde films. This study's conclusion considers landscape-oriented films that emerge from a tradition of filmmakers who produce noncommercial works for similar reasons as Deren or Brakhage. The work of James Benning in particular is worthy of consideration for his evolving attempts at allegorizing landscape without necessarily depending on the narrative presence of a human subject. In films such as *El Valley Centro* (2000), *Sogobi* (2001), and *Los* (2004), for example, Benning presents a series of various environmental scenes or glimpses, asking us to view each for an extended but equal amount of time. Here, we must contemplate the landscape beyond merely passive acknowledgment, and in this way I am reminded of seventeenth-century Dutch naturalistic landscapes and their potential to assume a complex allegorical dimension according to their specific cultural context. Benning's work demonstrates a similar potential in his choice of using the camera to frame certain landscapes for an amount of time that compels us to read them—in ways only our present culture may recognize—for indications of our ongoing exploitation of natural resources.

Even if landscape allegory has left the mainstream and returned to underground and nonnarrative modes of avant-garde film practice, it is useful to consider the historical trajectory of this cultural inclination and how it may inform future research. There are many branches of academic pursuit that could stem from affirming the emergence of the landscape allegory in cinema. This is only one among many potential inquiries into the function of setting or location in filmmaking. To this end, my study encourages an increased critical attention to this aspect of the medium in general. Because there is still so much room for deeper investigation, I intend this book as an introduction to landscape allegory in cinema. In the very least, I seek to abolish the assumption that manufactured indoor locations in *Caligari* or American film noir examples are antithetical to the

natural outdoor settings in other films. As it turns out, the latter are just as psychological in their narrative agendas. Landscape allegory becomes an important proving ground through which scholars can learn to recognize the deeper psychological and allegorical levels in films of all genres.