

CINEMATIC GEOGRAPHIES: ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM  
IN FILM ANALYSIS

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM.....	5
3. ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM IN FILM .....	9
The Columbia.....	10
No Country for Old Men.....	15
4. ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM IN CULTURAL STUDIES .....	20
5. CONCLUSION.....	23
REFERENCES CITED.....	25

## ABSTRACT

Through much of its history, film has been used as a mechanism to help naturalize human cultural assumptions. Through this process human cultural stereotypes are positioned as arising from nature. The theory of environmental determinism has been used as a mechanism to further this naturalizing process. This paper analyzes two films, *The Columbia* and *No Country for Old Men*, to uncover how environmental determinism is deployed across a range of film types as a naturalizing apparatus. The paper goes on to suggest how a more critical approach to film analysis using environmental determinism in conjunction with critical regionalism is a viable means of better understanding the complex interaction of nature and culture on film. This approach can help viewers better recognize when particular ideas within a film are structured as being derived from nature when in reality the ideas are human cultural artifacts.

## INTRODUCTION

People tend to justify stereotypes by grounding them in nature. While nature is external to human culture, it is often co-opted as a cultural site to justify various human preconceptions. Using nature as a source of cultural concepts is called naturalization (Culler, 1975). In many instances ideas that have negative implications or are hard for a particular culture to accept, are naturalized to give them more credibility and make them easier for the given culture to accept. If an idea is naturalized it quickly becomes fundamental in the structure of a given culture and efforts to critique, analyze, or otherwise dismantle that particular cultural assumption become very difficult. In order for naturalization to occur it requires a target idea and some natural site in which to locate it.

Environmental determinism is one example of how this naturalization process can occur. The theory of environmental determinism was introduced in the field of geography in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and helped cement that discipline's standing as a legitimate natural science. Environmental determinism is the idea that "the environment has some degree of influence or control over some or all human adaptations to survival on the planet earth" (Hardin, 2009). The theory positions human cultural structures as directly derived from the natural environment in which they arose. Although the theory in this most basic form posits nature as the source of human cultural forms, in its actual application, environmental determinism has been used to naturalize some of the worst prejudices our society could manufacture. For example, environmental determinism has been used to help

justify the idea that cultures in tropical climates are lazy and intellectually inferior because of the climate they live in (Hardin, 2009). Ellsworth Huntington, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century American geographer explains, “We know that the denizens of the torrid zone are slow and backward, and we almost universally agree that this is connected with the damp, steady heat.” (Huntington, 1945) This is environmental determinism at its worst and this kind of racism, along with the simplistic view that nature is a total driver of culture, have both been discredited within the sciences. The problem with Huntington’s application of environmental determinism is not that it links culture and climate, but that it naturalizes racism and privileges Euro-American cultures and their descendants. Rather than taking a rigorous scientific approach that helps explain how environment affects human culture, Huntington used environmental determinism as a means to naturalize racial superiority and justify Euro-American exploitation of other cultures and the environment itself.

Once environmental determinism has helped naturalize an idea, such as Euro-American superiority, the idea is easily perpetuated and becomes embedded in other cultural structures and artifacts where it can continue to pervade cultural thinking (Hardin, 2009). Film as a popular cultural medium is an easy container in which to transmit a variety of cultural messages and ensure that they continue to propagate throughout a particular culture and potentially beyond to other cultures as well. Once an idea has reached the popular cultural consciousness through a medium such as film, very little popular discourse occurs surrounding the idea and it is taken as fact across most of the culture.



In the US the West becomes the site of cultural naturalization for dominant Euro-American culture (White, 2011). Since the Puritans landed at Plymouth, Euro-America has always viewed the West as its *tabula rasa*, the blank space on which to create national identity (Glover, 2006). Often this identity has been naturalized in the West with stereotypes about manifest destiny, wilderness in need of civilizing, and environmental subjugation (Turner, 1893; Saunders, 2001). Whether the West was rural Massachusetts, the Ohio River Valley, or the Rocky Mountains, various cultural forms, from literature to landscape painting, helped naturalize Euro-American cultural projections (Glover, 2006). With the creation of cinema, film continued this tradition as naturalizing apparatus for popular culture. Since the American West was the naturalizing site, it is automatic for films about the American West to become the naturalizing mechanisms of popular culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Saunders, 2001). Since cinema's earliest days films about the West have been widely popular and the genre has maintained its staying power throughout much of film history (Saunders, 2001).

Since films about the West have long been a means to naturalize cultural stereotypes, if we want to uncover these cultural stereotypes and expose them as cultural rather than natural ideas we need an approach that critically examines the naturalizing process. This paper will analyze environmental determinism's role in justifying racism, cultural hegemony, and environmental destruction on film in order to give us a critical tool to separate the environmental from the cultural, and rethink how film portrays real nature-culture relationships. An in depth

examination of *The Columbia* (1949) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007) will serve as examples of how to deploy this type of analysis.

## ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM

Environmental determinism gained credence in geography because it was seen as a way “to establish that cause and effect relationships existed between various social phenomena and the natural world,” and “put human geography on par with the physical sciences in which determinism was axiomatic.” (Hardin, 2009)

Environmental determinism is derived from the theories of German geographer Friedrich Ratzel (Peet, 1985). In the US it was popularized by Ellen Churchill Semple whose research focused on physical geography and its relationship to cultural structures (Semple, 1911), and by Huntington who explored the linkage of climate to cultural structures and productivity (Huntington, 1945).

Huntington used climate and weather as the mechanisms through which environment influenced culture. His approach assumed that:

Climate stands first, not because it is the most important, but merely because it is the most fundamental. It is fundamental by reason of its vital influence upon the quantity and quality not only of man's food but most of his other resources; it plays a large part in determining the distribution and virulence of the parasites which cause the majority of diseases; and through its effect upon human occupations, modes of life, and habits, it is one of the main determinants of culture...Moreover, climate has a direct effect upon health in addition to its indirect effect through food, disease, and mode of life. Hence although climate may be no more important than other factors in determining the relative degree of progress in different parts of the world, it is more fundamental in the sense that it is a cause rather than a result of the other factors (Huntington, 1945).

He used data on factory worker productivity and weather statistics to develop maps of global economic productivity. He also surveyed other geographers to help determine where the “highest levels of civilization” were found and

correlated these with climatic factors. Huntington was concerned with discovering the same patterns of civilization and culture in both contemporary and historic trends. To this end he linked theories of migration, carrying capacity, and social Darwinism to help explain his version of environmental determinism. Whether talking about the migration patterns of ancient Greece or productivity in the Bahamas, Huntington always used climate as a means to make qualitative judgments about the various “levels” of civilization. He always coupled his ideas with notions of dominance and superiority that helped privilege certain civilizations while excluding and degrading others and marginalizing the environment, helping justify human exploitation of nature and non-Euro-American cultures in the process (Huntington, 1945).

While Huntington’s research viewed climate as a “fundamental determinant of human culture” (Huntington, 1945) his methodologies avoided serious analysis of these environmental influences. Instead he focused on using very specific environmental influences to naturalize racism and Euro-American superiority. His expressed goal, rather than trying to understand environmental influence was to overcome it:

In addition to the many efforts now being made to foster progress in the [US] South by other means, we should add a most vigorous attempt to discover ways of overcoming the handicap of climate. This book is written with the profound hope that the truth which it endeavors to discover may especially help those parts of the world whose climate, although favorable, does not afford the high degree of stimulation which in certain other restricted areas is so helpful (Huntington, 1945).

Rather than using environmental determinism as an objective methodology, Huntington injected subjectivity and value judgments throughout his research, naturalizing his preconceptions.

In many cases research exploring the link between the environment and culture was anecdotal and confounded correlation with causation (Hardin, 2009; Peet 1985). Huntington's work as a faculty member at Yale University and his positions as President of the American Association of Geographers, the Ecological Society of America, and the American Eugenics Society initially helped legitimize environmental determinism as an approach to naturalize cultural stereotypes. Although the research was done under the auspices of major academic institutions and a body of writing was amassed on the subject, the rigor and scientific legitimacy of environmental determinism were questioned soon after the ideas were proposed. By the 1940s and 50s environmental determinism had fallen out of favor in the field of geography in large part because it was seen as too simple to explain the complexity and diversity of human cultural structures (Hardin, 2009). Its use as a tool for eugenics and racism also helped discredit the idea of environmental determinism (Frenkel, 1992).

The all or nothing perspective of the environmental determinists, especially Huntington, and the racist uses of the idea go far toward dismissing it as pseudo-science, but the underlying attempt to discern how the natural environment influences human culture is still relevant today. The social structures that give rise to civilization and culture are inherently multi-layered and highly diverse. The

assumptions that nature is the only driver of these structures or, conversely, that it has no impact on culture are both too simplistic to help us understand the society we live in. "Physical form [environment] does influence human life and behavior but it cannot be treated as an independent phenomena or factor." (Purdy 2005)

Despite its disfavor in geography environmental determinism has survived through the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to the modern day in a variety of subtle ways, perhaps because of its "apparent commonsensical nature" (Frenkel 1992). The popularity of the theories of Jared Diamond point to a more nuanced view of geography where we can find evidence that nature and the environment play at least some role in the construction of culture. Diamond explicitly sets up his argument as non-racial, "Why did history unfold differently on different continents? In case this question immediately makes you shudder at the thought that you are about to read a racist treatise, you aren't: as you will see, the answers to the question don't involve human racial differences at all." (Diamond, 1999) He also approaches environmental determinism from an objective point of view rather than trying to use it as a tool for naturalizing human cultural stereotypes.

Taking a critical approach to environmental determinism in the study of cultural artifacts, including film, instead of using it as a scientific tool, can be a beneficial means of making sense of society's connection to the natural world. Rather than using environmental determinism to naturalize human cultural structures, deploying the theory in cultural studies can actually help us separate nature and culture and see the influence of one on the other.

## ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM IN FILM

Because environmental determinism is concerned with how the environment influences culture and because film is a cultural medium, we can use environmental determinism as a tool to analyze film and discover the environmental influence within this cultural apparatus. In light of environmental determinism's history we can also use it to discover how film helps naturalize human cultural assumptions and stereotypes.

I chose *The Columbia* and *No Country for Old Men* because they provide clear examples of how environmental determinism has found its way into the plot structure of films about the West across a variety of film modes. From documentary to fiction, the use of films about the West to naturalize dominant cultural ideology is widespread. Film relies on the environment of the western US as a naturalizing site for cultural preconceptions. Because this naturalization process has more to do with the chosen site of naturalization than with a particular film form or style, we find the same cultural preconceptions embedded across a wide range of films, both fiction and nonfiction. Even in fictional westerns that avoid more overt use of the nature-culture interaction, characters are typically constructed as having characteristics that are unique to, and derived from, the landscape and region around them (Calder, 1996, Mollegaard, 2009).

John Wayne's characters in many of his films exemplify this trait. He commonly portrays a strongly independent, highly moral, loyal and in many ways innocent and simplistic character that only arises out of the landscape and spaces of

the American West. An example of this character type is found in *Stagecoach* (1939). John Wayne, as Ringo Kid, is established as an outlaw in the film, but only because he wants to avenge the killing of his family. Because this is an act of justified revenge, Wayne retains the role of hero throughout the film. Ringo Kid is a very independent, go-it-alone type, who remains morally pure because his motivation for killing is to avenge family. This simplistic and inherent morality leads Ringo to ignore his own desire for an independent lifestyle instead cooperating with the stagecoach passengers to help them survive an Indian attack and reach Lordsburg. These positive character traits are naturalized in a wilderness environment because Ringo is depicted as arising from this environment. In the major conflict of the film, between the Apache Indians and the stagecoach passengers, Euro-American assumptions about conquering wilderness, and subduing “lesser” cultures are naturalized. Because Ringo retains his hero status throughout the Indian fight, and because he is a morally pure character arising from the western landscape, his killing of Indians and the domination of Euro-American culture in the West are naturalized through environmental determinism.

*The Columbia* (1949, d. Stephen B. Kahn)

Filmic applications of environmental determinism to naturalize dominant cultural stereotypes are not limited to fiction or to character development alone. The same approach can be found in documentary and be deployed through other parts of the plot structure. In the case of *The Columbia* the narrative itself serves to



naturalize cultural preconceptions in the West. The film was produced just four years after the third edition of Huntington's book was printed and, despite the decline of environmental determinism by this time, we still find manifestations of Huntington's approach throughout the film.

*The Columbia* is a documentary that was produced for Bonneville Power Administration by the US Department of the Interior as a propaganda piece to encourage residential, commercial, industrial, and agricultural growth in the Columbia River Basin and to gain support for further dam building. Because it is propaganda, the film uses many of Huntington's ideas to naturalize regional bias and human exploitation of nature.

The film begins by setting up nature and the Columbia River as powerful and pristine in its narration. Woody Guthrie's score describes the scene as "the closest thing to heaven that his weary feet have seen." Indigenous culture is visually wrapped into the same category as wild nature, as the river and Indians fishing appear in a comingled sequence where Euro-American influence is unseen. This pristine nature is used as a motivating force during the next sequences of migration out of the Depression and the Dustbowl towards the promise of the Columbia Basin. As the migration sequences directly follow the sequence of pristine heavenly nature the filmmakers imply that the environment of the Columbia Basin is directly motivating migration. The migrant characters in the film are pulled by the environment, away from the dustbowl states and toward the Columbia Basin. As the

narrator describes “the victims of the dustbowl” the visuals show sandstorms and farmland-turned-desert in stark contrast to the Columbia Basin’s fertility.

The film establishes the migration toward the Columbia Basin as environmentally determined. From there it goes on to naturalize reclamation and settlement of the Columbia River as part of the nation’s manifest destiny to modify and exploit nature. This approach is directly influenced by Huntington, where we find environmental influence over culture deployed as façade to naturalize Euro-American domination. While the migrants arrive in the Columbia Basin expecting to find a pristine fertile land they quickly discover that the basin requires improvement to make the land useful for agriculture and industry. The salvation is to harness nature with the Grand Coulee Dam, which, we are also told, can be couched as a part of nature itself, because the environment naturally dammed the Columbia during the last ice age. By using this kind of language the film confounds the actual influence of the environment with a naturalized human obligation to modify that same environment.

Reclamation, industrialization, and subjugation of the environment are the only activities that will make this a truly useful and livable region for society. This line of thinking is reinforced in the narration and the visuals as technology and mechanization are seen as prominent forces in the film. Machines, dams, orchards, and equipment are featured in close-up and praised at length in the narration.

The film continues with sequences celebrating the basin’s contribution to power production, the war effort, and the atomic bomb. Through the narration these

sequences simultaneously situate these “successes” as triumphs for both technology, in harnessing nature, and for nature itself. The atomic bomb is situated as arising from the environmental conditions of the Columbia at Hanford. These technological successes become naturalized because the film presents them as environmentally determined.

As the Columbia Basin finds itself “with too little power” and “the irony of too much water” environmental determinism is again deployed to naturalize human control over nature as we see and hear that more dams are needed to supply increased power for industry and to prevent flooding.

Late in the film, as more dams continue to be justified, we encounter the proposal for Hell’s Canyon Dam on the Snake River on the border between Oregon and Idaho. The sequence provides a perfect closed loop between environmental determinism and environmental exploitation that Huntington would be proud of:

The dam will create a 91 mile lake to hold back the unruly waters of the Snake, key dam in providing protection for the lower Columbia. Power to turn the nations largest phosphate reserves into precious plant food, for which a hungry world cries out. Power to extend the frontiers of opportunity for countless men and women who look westward hopefully; for land and jobs, for security and happiness (*The Columbia*, 1949).

The film is fairly complex in its narration and uses environmental determinism to naturalize ideas about Euro-American hegemony and manifest destiny. *The Columbia* as a propaganda film, speaks to the need for humans to control nature and harness it for economic and nationalist gain, this subtext and setup lend themselves to an environmentally deterministic interpretation. The

notion that Huntington's ideas feed so directly into theories about the dominant and superior position of Euro-American societies over nature seems initially antithetical to basic environmental determinism until one looks at Huntington's end goals. His intention, to use environmental determinism as a means to justify Euro-American supremacy allows him to naturalize his theories as pre-determined by nature; allowing his racism to be naturalized in the environment, rather than as an extension of human cultural structures (Huntington, 1945). While *The Columbia* does not necessarily run to the same racist conclusions that much of Huntington's research did, its use of his theories to justify the domination and reclamation of the Columbia River Basin has resulted in negative impacts from the 1940s to today. The impacts include destruction of the salmon fishery, alteration of Indian culture, loss of natural river processes, and radioactive contamination.

By naturalizing human control over the environment via subtle uses of environmental determinism, *The Columbia* fails to present its audience a real picture of the Columbia River Basin. Despite its status as documentary, the film serves to disconnect the place it attempts to document and instead creates a wholly cinematic Columbia River that exists only in the movie theater. Rather than incorporating more accurate conclusions about the Columbia Basin's potential to influence human culture, the film takes an approach that uses environmental determinism to justify the destruction of nature in the basin.

*No Country for Old Men* (2007, d. Ethan Coen & Joel Coen)

Despite the historic distance from the foundations of environmental determinism and Huntington's methodology, contemporary film continues to rely on many of the same cultural assumptions, and it still serves to naturalize those assumptions. Films set in the West today typically do not deploy environmental determinism as a means to naturalize the same environmental destruction as *The Columbia* or the racist goals of Huntington. They also take a much less overt approach to Euro-American domination, but they still employ the same naturalizing approaches as earlier forms of environmental determinism.

*No Country for Old Men* provides a suitable case study to examine how the West in contemporary cinema continues to be used as a naturalizing site for human cultural ideas via environmental determinism. The film won an Academy Award for Best Motion Picture of the Year in 2008. Its popularity and critical acclaim have given it wide viewership. The film also serves to illustrate the wide range of films in which environmental determinism can be found.

*No Country for Old Men* is a fiction film that tells the story of a modern West Texas cowboy who stumbles across a large sum of drug money, returns to the scene of the crime to give a dying man a drink of water, and is tailed for the rest of the film by hired guns who are trying to retrieve the money. In the course of the pursuit the film weaves the stories of the cowboy, Llewelyn Moss, the contract killer, Anton Chigurh, and the sheriff, Ed Tom Bell.

The film opens with a series of wide slow landscape shots with voice over from the sheriff reflecting on the escalating violence he has seen throughout his career. He also gives a family history in which he explains that, since his grandfather, his family has had a long history as Texas lawmen. From this opening sequence the film deploys environmental determinism to naturalize the sheriff as derived from the landscape and it begins to naturalize the landscape as the site of violence and lawlessness. This approach ignores Bell's status as an arbiter of the law, a human cultural institution. This serves to legitimate his position of authenticity as the story's narrator. Bell's established family history, his slow Texas drawl, and calm dry analysis of a vicious crime scene are all positioned as environmentally determined. He is also depicted as slightly racist towards Mexicans, another position which the film naturalizes.

Like many other films about the American West, *No Country for Old Men* uses a conflict between western and non-western culture to help advance the plot. The antagonist, Chigurh, is established as non-western in his first appearance. We see him killing his first victims and everything about his character establishes him as foreign to the region. His accent, his wardrobe, and his quiet and unusual mannerisms all suggest that he is from somewhere else. In contrast Moss is immediately naturalized. The scenes in which we first see these two characters occur back to back and the line "hold still" is used to connect them. In the first sequence Chigurh is killing a man whose car he is about to steal, while in the next shot Moss is muttering the line to a distant antelope he has sighted in his rifle scope.

The important element is not the conflict of western and non-western culture, but the way these scenes serve to situate that cultural conflict in the natural environment. In Chigurh's case the environment he is derived from is non-western and we encounter him first on the side of a highway killing someone with a cattle gun. This establishment of Chigurh as traveler and drifter is retained throughout the film and we mostly find his character along the highway, in seedy motels or at roadside backwaters. In all of these landscapes he is clearly out of place with his surroundings. In contrast we first meet Moss in the middle of an antelope hunt, a natural and even primitive environment. Although Moss travels the same highways and byways as Chigurh he is always portrayed as being at home in the landscape. Because environmental determinism is used to naturalize this cultural conflict, West Texas becomes the landscape of the hero. Despite all the violence and the sheriff's lament of this violence the West Texas landscape still comes out on top. The audience is led to assume that the landscape where Chigurh comes from can only be worse than West Texas.

The naturalizing application of environmental determinism is also deployed in the inciting incident, which catalyzes the rest of the story. After Moss has found a briefcase of cash in the middle of the desert at a drug buy gone bad, he returns to the site in the middle of the night to bring a dying man some water. This decision results in his being chased away from the site by drug smugglers coming to investigate the situation. In the process he abandons his truck and the drug smugglers are able to use it to track Moss.

His decision to return to the site is what motivates the rest of the film's plot and it is environmentally determined. The desert site of the drug buy is established as an extremely harsh environment and the dying man's thirst is environmentally determined. As Moss lies awake thinking of the man his decision to bring him water is also environmentally influenced. Moss is aware of the dangers of a harsh unforgiving environment. If he does not assist the man no one else will and this assistance is the expected behavior within the West Texas community. Without this type of generous, help-your-neighbor mindset, the community would be unable to operate in such a tough environment. Naturalizing Moss's decision to bring the man water situates him as a moral resident of that region and reinforces his heroic place in the film. While Moss's decision is, in reality, a cultural one, the film decides to naturalize it to help advance the plot. This approach bears strong similarity to the naturalization that occurs in *Stagecoach* when Ringo decides to help the stagecoach reach Lordsburg.

In *No Country for Old Men* Moss and his wife, Carla Jean, are the only characters able to stand up to Chigurh. Moss confronts Chigurh and lives to tell the tale. Carla Jean confronts him near the end of the film when he arrives to kill her and she is the only character to look Chigurh in the eye and force him to make a conscious choice to kill. If we read the main conflict in the film as the conflict between western and non-western ideologies, then the Moss's strength is derived from their environment. Their tough, no-nonsense, forge ahead attitudes are both



positioned as arising from the environment. In standing up to Chigurh's violence the Mosses stand up for their community in a way previous victims have not.

Just as many other films about the West, *No Country for Old Men* continues the tradition of naturalizing human cultural notions in the environment. Although westerns and films about the West continue to evolve and adapt to remain relevant, they also continue to employ the environment as backdrop on which to hang human culture. Exactly what cultural assumptions are being naturalized in a particular film and across the arc of film history have changed, but couching those assumptions in the environment remains constant. Environmental determinism has helped us separate the natural and the cultural; the next step is to rethink how film can more accurately portray nature-culture relationships.

## ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM IN CULTURAL STUDIES

Film as a means of helping society explore the nature-culture relationship will only become increasingly important in the internet age. The proliferation of science and nature programming and the continued fascination with the American West are a testament to film's power in helping us make sense of our connection to nature and place. The ways in which the environment influences our lives and in turn our cultural structures can be complex and difficult to assess. At least in the realm of cultural studies, environmental determinism offers us an approach to viewing film that helps us acknowledge nature's role in shaping our culture. Without critical analysis that takes into account both environmental determinism's checkered history and contemporary context, we allow the idea to go unchallenged as a universal device underpinning a wide range of film styles and genres (Hardin, 2009; Mollegaard, 2009). The film analyses above help demonstrate how environmental determinism can be distorted to fit human cultural narratives such as manifest destiny in *The Columbia* and regional privilege in *No Country for Old Men*. Rather than acknowledging environmental agency, we twist environmental determinism to naturalize and justify our own cultural agenda, in many cases to the detriment of the environment.

A logical place to incorporate environmental determinism as an approach to film analysis is in the field of critical regionalism. Critical regionalism is a contemporary approach to understanding nature-culture relationships. Kenneth Frampton originally popularized the idea in the field of architecture in the mid

1980s. He drew on other sources across architecture and cultural studies to suggest an approach whereby:

The specific culture of the region—that is to say, its history in both a geological and agricultural sense—becomes inscribed into the form and realization of the work. ...it has a capacity to embody, in built form, the prehistory of the place, its archaeological past and its subsequent cultivation and transformation process across time. Through this layering into the site the idiosyncrasies of place find their expression without falling into sentimentality (Frampton, 1983).

He went on to include climate and “temporally inflected qualities of local light” as considerations in this place-based awareness of his critical regionalism. Despite its initial deployment in architecture, critical regionalism has found a place in cultural studies from a way of legitimating regional literature (Calder, 1996) to a way of understanding the “post-western” world (Kollin, 2007). In the context of film analysis Frampton’s built architectural form bears similarity to the building of a film’s form through the film production process.

Critical regionalism uses a geographically place-based approach to analyze culture and cultural trends through time and across a range of scales connecting real regions with each other, nations, and an increasingly global cultural perspective (Powell, 2007). The point of the critical regional approach is not to be driven by a desire towards isolation and nostalgia, but to critically analyze the place specificness of region to help make sense of complex cultural webs within the region and inter-regionally (Kollin, 2007; Powell, 2007).

Critical regionalism, while more interested in studying human cultural structures and relationships, bases its approach fundamentally in the nature-culture

relationship. Environmental determinism provides another approach to analyzing the nature-culture relationship, which can enhance a critical regional approach. Environmental determinism can provide the analytical tool to view the influence of naturalization on film character and plot. Extending this analysis in a critical regional approach, situates the film within the real world space both in terms of connecting plot to the real space in which it is set and in terms of connecting the film to the viewers real regional space.

By employing critical regionalism and environmental determinism to evaluate the nature-culture relationship, we can begin to critically analyze the importance of landscape in film and connect filmic landscapes to their corresponding geographic landscapes. Basing film analysis first in nature's influence on cultural structure and second on culture's interaction with nature in a specifically place-based context can empower both landscape and region as valuable and unique elements within a more global cultural structure. This type of approach can result in a deeper understanding of what film tells us about our connection to nature and place.

## CONCLUSION

The film form relies on the audience to suspend their disbelief and engage in the pathos of a particular film. Unfortunately this tactic is simultaneously what allows us to create successful film and, at the same time, marginalize and ignore critical elements of the real world. This tension in film can be a positive element, and quality film can actually use this simplifying process to help elucidate the real world. The danger is that in suspending disbelief the audience will also suspend a critical and realistic sense of film as a cultural construction. If we ignore the fact that film is a cultural construction we also ignore the underlying cultural preconceptions that support films structure. Too often, particularly in films about the West, this is manifest in filmmakers trying to naturalize the cultural assumptions underlying the film in order to better engage the audience in the story at hand. When this occurs the audience confounds real nature with human culture veiled as nature. Whether a film is propaganda, traditional western fiction, or even conservation documentary, these assumptions carry well beyond the movie theater doors. In covering the effects of environmental determinism with the apparatus of film production we risk covering those effects in the real world as well.

Whether a person resides in the western US or not, filmic versions of the West color our perceptions of the region. Since the western US does not occur in a vacuum, but rather in a complex matrix of other regions, nations, and global cultural structures, this acceptance of environmental determinism as a naturalizing mechanism can have real and damaging consequences especially to the people and

landscapes of the West itself. Beginning to separate the natural and cultural is the first step in dismantling and critiquing these foundational cultural assumptions. This approach can give us clearer vision to approach issues of importance in the West today through film including: oil and gas drilling, grazing policy, urban-rural conflict, water policy, and property rights. If we ignore environmental determinism on film and accept naturalized human cultural assumptions within the landscape we will continue to function as a John Wayne character playing out a melodrama in some cinematic West.

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