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Landscape, Imagery, and Symbolism in Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo*

Matt Melia

Introduction

Guardian critic Steve Rose attempts to sum up and define the Chilean director Alejandro Jodorowsky's strange, complex, transgressive, and provocative oeuvre via a roll call of diverse cultural and religious reference points:

> If you have never seen one of his movies, they are difficult to explain. You could start by throwing together Sergio Leone, Luis Bunuel, Hieronymus Bosch and Buddha, and perhaps start by spiking their Kool-Aid for good measure. They're filled with Wild Beasts, cosmic symbolism, freaks, naked women and spiritual masters. Where else, for example, would you see a re-enactment of the conquest of Latin America with costumed frogs and chameleons? Or a geriatric hermaphrodite squirting milk from breasts that appear to be the head of ocelots. (2009)

Jodorowsky's cinema is not merely "difficult to explain" but it consciously evades explanation, easy critical definition, or generic categorization. It deliberately misdirects the viewer via a complex bricolage of disparate sources, symbols, and cultural markers. The director offers an alchemical mix of artistic influences and high and low cultural points of reference (from Antonin Artaud and The Theatre of Cruelty, Samuel Beckett and Salvador Dali to the slapstick comedy of Buster Keaton and George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* [1968]); popular genre and exploitation cinemas (not only the Western but also the horror, religious drama, and even the Samurai films); and esoteric spiritual symbolism (drawing heavily and imagistically on the Tarot in films such as *El Topo* [1970] and *The Holy Mountain* [1973]).

Textually and meta-textually, Jodorowsky's cinema is also one of displacement. His films not only present narratives of displacement and journeys/quests (a

signifying trope of the Western); they are themselves displaced entities (or may be read as such), existing on the extreme margins of the global paracinema. Victoria Ruetalo and Dolores Tierney (2009) include *El Topo* as a significant moment within the canon of "Latsploitation Cinema" (the exploitation cinema of Latin America: a "displaced" cinema which they define in opposition to the exploitation cinema of North America as having its own particular cultural and industrial criteria and practices).

This chapter will present a discussion of *El Topo* as a transgressive, violent, displaced Western and examine how the film's presentation of the scorched, surrealist, mountainous, and desert landscapes of Mexico as a spaces of displacement, metamorphosis, apocalypse, and extinction recall and deliberately appropriate the absurdist landscapes and imagery of Irish writer and dramatist Samuel Beckett's early dramas. *El Topo* does employ the thematic and iconographic tropes of the Hollywood Western. However, here the iconic figure of the black-leather-clad gunfighter, "El Topo" ("The Mole," played by Jodorowsky), is propelled on a violent, absurdist, picaresque, and ultimately cyclical spiritual journey of enlightenment through an abstract and carnivalesque landscape of deformed and grotesque bodies, spiritual masters, and transgressive sexual experiences that subvert the Fordian or Hawksian landscapes of the Hollywood Western. Similarly, *El Topo* is also cloaked in the mantle of a Sergio Leone-esque visual aesthetic but Jodorowsky invites the viewer to gaze beyond this facade by increasingly subverting the film's generic identity as it moves inexorably toward its third and final act.

Both Foster Hirsh (1972) and J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum (1983) have examined *El Topo*'s three-act structure. Hoberman and Rosenbaum present a topographical view of the film's structure, narrative, and (counter) cultural context while noting how the film is broken into three "movements," each of which untethers the film more and more from the generic anchor of the Western. They describe the first of these movements as "a kind of Spaghetti Western with crudely Bunuelian overtones" (1983: 82). This movement ends with the gunfighter's visceral castration of the Colonel (David Silva) and the abandonment of his son (Brontis Jodorowsky) to the monastic care of the monks he has rescued. In the second movement, Jodorowsky "broadens his range to let fly with a nonstop barrage of Tao, Sufi, Tarot, Nietzschean, Zen Buddhist, and biblical references" (1983: 82) while El Topo defeats three spiritual masters. The third movement

> concerns El Topo's penitent reincarnation. In tight close up, the hero is shown as a frizzy-haired blond, sitting in the lotus position and holding a flower. He has

> just woken up from a twenty-year sleep, during which the dwarfs and cripples have cared for him. (1983: 86)

As the gunfighter sheds his iconic costume in favor of the robes of enlightenment, the film itself gradually sheds its costume and the visual aesthetic of the Western genre (although as we shall see, not entirely).

By focusing on the visual aesthetics that Jodorowsky's employs, this chapter will initially explore the presentation of landscape in *El Topo.* In the next section I will explore how *El Topo* "displaces" the Western by examining the film's contextual cultural landscapes and its engagement with cultural imagery. In the final section I will note how (certainly in the first two movements) Jodorowsky deliberately scatters the visual iconography of Samuel Beckett's work across the cinematic landscape of his film. While Hoberman and Rosenbaum, Benn Cobb (2007) and Doyle Greene (2007) have all noted and explored the influence of Antonin Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty (a "total" theater of purely visceral-gestural attack and physical-metaphysical experience) on *El Topo*, the pervasive influence of Beckett's work has been less well noted (despite the director's own personal experience of it in the immediate postwar years in France). I will thus explore how Beckett's influence works to further distances the film from its outward Western identity.

Cultural Landscapes: (Dis)Placing *El Topo*

The Landscape of Mexico

Wimal Dissanayake proposes that

> the relationship between cinema and landscape is a complex and multifaceted one, generating issues of ontology, epistemology, aesthetics and forms of cultural representation. Most often, we tend to think of landscape in films as a provider of the requisite background for the unfolding of the narrative and a giver of greater visual density and cogency. This is indeed true so far as it goes: however, landscapes in cinema perform numerous other functions that are more subtle and more complex which invest the filmic experience with greater meaning and significance. (2010: 191)

The landscape of *El Topo* has a much broader function than simply serving as a backdrop to an unfolding narrative. Jodorowsky uses the evocative deserts,

caves, and mountain ranges of Mexico as a canvas to explore and deconstruct cinematic Hollywood myths and their cultural imposition on the cinema of Latin and South America (which has its own indigenous "cowboy" or Gaucho culture). The Brazilian director Glauber Rocha explained that

> Hollywood films have had a tremendous meaning for Latin Americans, they colonized a culture. They kill our culture. Things I saw in Westerns come back in my films in other forms. One of the things that characterized the New Wave was a nostalgia for the old Hollywood. The first films of Truffaut and Godard where an attempt to read these symbols. Hollywood is the major influence in colonizing the minds and culture of Latin America. . . . The Myths of the West are very appealing to Latin American masses because they are historical. When they think of film they think of Westerns, it is a fundamental myth in films for them. (Glenn O'Brien 1970: 37)

One might hypothesize here that if, as Rocha claims, the Hollywood Western and its myths are fundamentally ingrained in the DNA of contemporaneous Latin American Cinema then Jodorowsky's intent is to destabilize and subvert this cultural colonization by deconstructing it, lampooning it (notably in the third act's presentation of the grotesque whorehouse and the Wild West town's ritual fetishization of the gun) and remythologizing it through the imposition of arcane religious iconography and *Eastern* spirituality while presenting a landscape that is at once familiar and also utterly alien.

One might also hypothesize that the landscape of Mexico had the same appeal to Jodorowsky as it did to his greatest influence: the founder of the Theatre of Cruelty, Antonin Artaud, who traveled to the Sierra Tarahumaras to engage in Peyote rituals with the Tarahumaras Indians. Stephen Barber notes that

> Artaud anticipated that he would discover a revolutionary society in Mexico, and that it would conform to his vision of a kind of anatomical revolution which would dispense with its own history. He believed that the Mexican revolution of 1910-11 had signaled a return to the mythological concerns of the imperial civilizations which had existed before the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1519. He would be the instrument that could catalyse and focus these revolutionary forces. . . . Although Artaud was disappointed in his attempt to break utterly from European society, he nevertheless found in Mexico a tenable image of revolution, which fed into his work until his death. He discovered revolution inscribed into the Mexican landscape itself, as a perpetually self-cancelling and self-creative force. (2003: 96)

For Jodorowsky this primal backdrop is integral to his cinematic revolution, and the creation of a new revolutionary cinematic aesthetic. Like Artaud, Jodorowsky aims to break away from and oppose a dominant colonial (cultural ideology). Jodorowsky's landscapes are complex and mythic spaces. If, for Artaud, this experience of the Mexican landscape was part of an ongoing project of personal, ritualistic, metaphysical, and theatrical liberation, we might consider that for Jodorowsky it has a similar function in liberating and freeing cinema and reimagining the cinematic image. Karl Smith once asked Jodorowsky:

> Mythology was a necessary tool in interpreting the landscape—geography, meteorology, astronomy—but how can myth work, continue to fulfill its function, when as a society we know these myths not to be true?

Jodorowsky responded:

> We need to study myth to be a wise person. A normal person is living just like an animal or a plant and if we want to develop, to grow inside, we need myths—old knowledge, traditional knowledge, these are looking for something that is lost: alchemy was searching for that, magic was searching for that, religion was searching for that. "Where is the centre of the universe?," "How do I find the centre?": some persons, they say the centre is the heart. In addition, the centre of the heart is love. Love is beauty. We cannot know the truth but we can know love and beauty. (Smith 2015)

This idea is the key to understanding *El Topo*: the landscape is a space or canvas where the idea of myths and symbols themselves may be explored (this includes cinematic, religious, and spiritual mythologies, symbols, and iconographies). One might argue then that the incorporation of Beckettian imagery, with its connotations of spiritual emptiness, corporeal evanescence, existential anxiety, and the God-shaped hole at the heart of the twentieth century, presents a counterpoint to the diverse religious imagery and spiritual richness found in *El Topo*. In recognizing and incorporating Beckett's influence into the visual DNA and iconography of the film, I would suggest that Jodorowsky was seeking to engage with a fully comprehensive array of belief systems which included imagery suggestive of the existential *absence* of belief. The arid landscape of the film is presented as a spiritual void (note the grotesque hypocrisy, cruelty, and spiritual emptiness of the frontier town at the third "movement") which Jodorowsky fills with a barrage of spiritual and religious imagery. Similarly, in suggesting that Jodorowsky was attempting to repurpose cinema itself, Roger Ebert observes

that *El Topo*'s diverse mix of "symbols and mythologies" creates an effect that resembles that of T. S. Eliot's stream-of-consciousness poem "The Waste Land" (1922), "especially Eliot's notion of shoring up fragments of mythologies against the ruins of the post-Christian era. . . . What is El Topo seeking in the desert? Why, he is seeking symbols, images, bizarre people and events with which to fill the film?" (Ebert 2007 [1970]).

Displacing the Western

Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner note that

> the role of the film director could be seen as similar to the role of an individual map-maker. Both maps and films assume and position audiences ideologically as much as geographically. The interaction between map-makers and film makers and audiences can be akin to a shared pilgrimage in which the individual, the group, or a culture moves through a familiar or newly discovered landscape. (2010: 16)

This is an appropriate filter through which to discuss *El Topo*, whose blasted and scorched desert landscapes recall those of the avant-garde cultural preoccupations of its director as well as those of Artaud and Beckett. Jodorowsky is a cinematic "map maker": not only does his central character navigate a reimagined "Western" space that is simultaneously familiar and alien (reflecting the cultural and geographical differences between Latin and North America), his cinema is an experimental and experiential one where the viewer is invited not merely to witness but also to experience and share this "pilgrimage" or journey. Furthermore, the landscape is an open space in which the viewer is "positioned" (both consciously and unconsciously) in relation to an array of high and low cultural markers.

Here, with regard to El Topo's own physical and metaphysical journey across the film's landscape, we may also note a further degree of self-reflexivity. Jodorowsky who plays the central role of El Topo had, himself, traversed a series of international and cultural spaces and landscapes. Jodorowsky has described his own itinerant journey thus:

> My parents were Russian. I was born in Iquique, a small town of 2000 people in Chile near Bolivia. I lived in the desert for 10 years. The children didn't accept me because I was Russian. I moved to Santiago, the capital of Chile where I studied Philosophy and Psychology. I worked as a circus clown. I

> acted in several plays and formed my own marionette theatre. I created a theatre of mime. I lived in Santiago for 10 years. The young men did not accept me because I was a Jew. I went to Europe and lived in Paris. During that time I worked with Marcel Marceau. . . . I directed Maurice Chevalier. I founded "The Panic Movement" with Arrabal and Topor. I realised a 4 hour happening which has been acclaimed as the best happening ever made. I lived in Paris for 10 years. The French did not accept me because I was Chilean. I moved to Mexico where I directed 100 plays (Ionesco, Strindberg, Arrabal, and Beckett). . . . The Mexicans didn't accept me because I was French. Now I live in the United States where I am finishing my film *The Holy Mountain*. The Americans think I am Mexican. After 10 years, I will move to another planet. They won't accept me because they think I am American! (Cerdán and Labayan 2009: 103)

Just as the director describes himself as emerging from the desert, his cinematic counterpart, The Gunfighter, is depicted in the film's opening sequence emerging out of the burning desert sand on horseback with his young naked son in tow. Throughout the film Jodorowsky presents characters who merge with, emerge out of, or are encased by the surrounding landscape. For example, in the film's second movement El Topo is depicted as almost physically merging with a rock face while Maria (Mara Lorenzio) bathes in a desert pool. This approach is also indicative of the pervasive influence of Beckett, whose own characters are contained or imprisoned both literally and metaphorically by their environments. For example, Winnie in *Happy Days* (1961) is presented buried up to her waist in sand beneath the burning sun in Act 1 and then buried up to her neck in Act 2.

Stephen Barber further notes the theme of displacement in Jodorowsky's films, observing that "with Jodorowsky, everything is pushed to the extreme, with the result that his audiences experience the impact of his films from a uniquely sensitised, unforeseeably displaced viewing position" before adding that "Jodorowsky has inhabited deliriously outlandish and wayward territory, often staking claims in the pre-occupations and locations of his films, to terrains that at first sight nobody else would want to approach" (2007: 9). The burning and surrealist desert landscapes of *El Topo* are filled with grotesque, deformed figures (dwarves, hermaphrodites, amputees), shocking violence (e.g., the charnel house of the village massacre stumbled upon by El Topo and his son and the visceral castration of the Colonel), and mystical esotericism which works to defamiliarize any viewer accustomed to the more recognizable imagery

and locales of the Hollywood Western. As Barber notes, "It is evident that Jodorowsky and the Hollywood industry work according to two irreconcilably different conceptions of time and myth" (2007: 11).

Indeed, *El Topo* is the maleficent double of the classical Hollywood Western, a genre itself built on a set of frontier, colonialist, and masculine myths played out against the mythologized space of the American West and which through a director like John Ford offered a romanticized version of America's violent history. In *El Topo*'s third movement we find a parody of a Wild West town peopled by what Foster Hirsh describes as "grotesque parodies of acquisitive, rapacious, hypocritical capitalists. Putrefying everything they touch, the towns people force El Topo and his midget-teacher-companion to perform public intercourse for the public amusement" (1972: 13).

In this "Wild West Town," churchgoers fetishize and worship the gun, taking part in a ritual of Russian Roulette which ends with the brutal physical death of a young boy and the spiritual death of the, now adult, son of El Topo. While *El Topo* is the maleficent double of the Hollywood Western, it also contains interesting "doubled" imagery, the most obvious being the mirroring of the village massacre and the massacre of the rabbits later in the film. Interestingly, the white uniforms of the massacred villagers are not only visually mirrored in the overhead shot of the massacred white rabbits. The uniforms are also suggestive of a cult—a prescient image in the wake of the Manson family's crimes. This detail supports Hoberman and Rosenbaum's suggestion that *El Topo* is linked to the "wasteland of the counterculture" (1983: 77). Indeed, at the film's finale, the now grown up son of El Topo has rejected the spiritual vestments of the monk and has adopted the earlier dark costume of his father—the fetishistic black leather of the gunfighter. This provides a contrast to *El Topo* himself, who in the final movement has rejected such a costume in favor of the garb of a Buddhist monk.

When comparing *El Topo* with Arrabal's Spanish Civil War drama *Viva La Muerte* (1971), Hirsch observes that *El Topo* is "built on the same general themes: the tortuous discovery and acquisition of manhood" (1972: 11). The film opens with El Topo instructing his young son to dispose of childish things by burying his toy and a photograph of his mother in the burning desert sand, in a series of images that resonate with both Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and *Happy Days* (1961).

Richard Slotkin notes the transition between what he terms the "Town Tamer" Westerns of the classical Hollywood (see *Dodge City* [Michael Curtiz,

1939] and *My Darling Clementine* [John Ford, 1946]) and the "Outlaw" or "Revenger" Westerns of the postwar years (see *The True Story of Jesse James* [Nicholas Ray, 1957]), and suggests that the later "psychological Westerns" appealed to "film makers and artists who sought to make the genre a vehicle for works of 'literary' seriousness" (1992: 380). This elevation of the genre is present in Jodorowsky's film via the visual references to Beckett and other absurdist writers and dramatists. Indeed, Hirsch observes that

> Jodorowsky wants every bit as much as Arrabal or Artaud to dazzle and purge us, he is as alert to the exorcising potential of Cruelty and Panic, he is as conscious of myth and ritual as the Becks and Grotowski, he is as attuned to the absurd as Ionesco or Beckett. (1972: 12)

Slotkin notes the festishization of the gunfighter in the Western: an isolated, existential, and mythic figure, apposite to the genre as it developed post–Second World War and later exemplified by Alan Ladd's eponymous character in *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), when observing that

> ideological clichés of the historical Western give way to a new view of the Western myth in which the difference between lawman and outlaw is obscured by their kindred gift for violence and is rendered problematic by their characterological difference or alienation from their communities. . . . The Gunfighter is psychologically troubled, isolated from normal society by something dark in his nature / his past. That darkness is bound up with and expressed by his highly specialised social function: he is a killer by profession. (1992: 383)

El Topo is a pastiche of that figure and while the character incorporates elements of this trope, we are given no information about his background, identity, or his purpose: he emerges fully formed from the sands of the desert. In this way El Topo is more akin to the Western characters that are commonly played by Clint Eastwood.

Jodorowsky, also replaces the romantic mythos of the North American Western with a set of cosmic, esoteric myths and Jewish, Latin American and Eastern belief systems which appear discordant with the mythic space of the specifically Christian Hollywood Western. One may also question the extent to which *El Topo* navigates the contemporary revisionism of the Western, as exemplified by the films of New Hollywood. Despite its non-American origins, Rosenbaum (2018) notes how *El Topo* was central in the formation of the subgenre of the "Acid Western."

El Topo and the Countercultural Cinematic Landscape

El Topo is frequently recognized and discussed by commentators as the prototypical cult midnight movie and the apotheosis of the paracinematic: an iconic moment of countercultural cinema. Roger Greenspun observes that

> during its months of midnight screenings at the Elgin, Alexandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* became a secret rite of some importance in New York City. . . . During the time of its midnight screenings I asked someone who had seen it what *El Topo* was all about. He responded "Everything" and now I've seen it I know what he meant. (1971)

El Topo's countercultural contexts and aesthetics have been much discussed elsewhere (Cobb [2007]; Hoberman and Rosenbaum [1983]; Greene [2007]), so there is no need to recycle the history of its run as a "midnight movie" in New York City here. Similarly, *El Topo*'s status as an "Acid Western" has been well documented by Rumsey Taylor (2013).

Indeed, the film was a fixed point in the countercultural cinematic landscape of North America. While *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) might outwardly anticipate *El Topo* in the way that it mythologizes the landscape, foregrounds themes of cultural isolation and displacement, and presents characters on an abstract quest for subjectivity and identity, a more comparable film is one which lies outside the Western genre altogether but which was still absorbed into the countercultural cinematic zeitgeist: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968). Indeed, Hoberman and Rosenbaum opine that *El Topo* "captured the countercultural imagination like no movie since Stanley Kubrick's *2001*" (1983: 94). The countercultural context and identity of *2001*, its presentation of a spiritual journey or odyssey and its emphasis on cycles, set Kubrick's film up as an intriguing comparison piece. Just like *El Topo*, *2001* redrew the parameters of its genre and demanded to be received as an immersive "total" experience rather than a classical exercise in narrative storytelling. Christopher Frayling reports that Jodorowsky acknowledged that the "'duel of destiny' [set] in a circular *corrida*" in *El Topo* was a "small homage" to Sergio Leone's Italian Westerns (1981: 285). However, it is the atypical, violent and surreal Spaghetti Western *Django Kill* (*Se sei vivo spara*, Giulio Questi, 1967) that *El Topo* usually gets compared to. Mark Goodall asserts that *Django Kill* exists "in close artistic proximity" to *El Topo* while also functioning in a similar way (2016: 202, 208). Although *Django Kill* is ostensibly a Spaghetti Western, Goodall finds genre-

bending cinematic strategies relating to Italian *mondo* shockumentaries, *giallo* thrillers, and gothic horror films at play too (2016: 204–9).

Similarly, both *2001* and *El Topo* collapse a variety of cinematic frontiers and boundaries and reimagine the role and purpose of cinematic landscape. *2001* moves beyond the generic parameters of science fiction while *El Topo* does likewise in relation to the Western genre. While science fiction elements are visibly present in *2001* (spaceships, dangerous artificial intelligences, alien consciousnesses, and so on), Kubrick's use of these genre tropes ultimately results in the film as a whole transcending its genre identity. In *El Topo* Jodorowsky anchors the viewer to the Western by employing common genre tropes (horses, guns, the wilderness, and so on) and then moves them beyond the Western via his incorporation of mystical, spiritual, and biblical imagery and allusion. This is something that the marketing for the film was keen to point out since the trailer advised potential viewers to "be prepared to the live the most wonderful experience of your life. . . . *El Topo* Is NOT a Western, it goes far beyond any Western. . . . *El Topo* is not a religious film . . . it contains all religions."

There are parallels as well between El Topo's transcendent journey and the transcendent journey that *2001*'s astronaut Dave Bowman (Keir Dullea) and, in a broader sense, humanity itself experiences—a journey which begins within the primal desert landscape of the "dawn of man" sequence where man is necessarily depicted in his hominid state and ends with the birth of the Star Child at the film's conclusion. Cobb notes *El Topo*'s allusions to Friedrich Nietzsche when he notes that Nietzsche's

> *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [1883] is an account of a cave dwelling prophet who emerges from his mountain solitude to preach to the people. This is directly referenced in *El Topo* at the beginning of the third act, when the spiritually reborn El Topo awakes in a cave of inbred cripples and travels down to the people (living in this case in a Wild West Sodom). Zarathustra announces the death of God and argues for man to master himself and harness his own power, to be reborn as "Ultimate Man" or "Superman." (2007: 73)

Hence both Jodorowsky and Kubrick present the emergence and rebirth of man from the literal and metaphorical cave, using primal and primitive landscapes. *2001* actually opens with Richard Strauss's "Thus Spake Zarathustra" (1896) actually playing on the soundtrack as the sun comes up during the "dawn of man" sequence. Similarly, while Kubrick took the cosmic void of space—the "landscape" of his film—and filled it with evasive symbolic meaning, Jodorowsky

took *El Topo*'s desert void and filled it with myths and symbols of all kinds. Indeed, rather than being a space odyssey, Cobb suggests that El Topo is "a desert odyssey" (2007: 74). Significantly, both *El Topo* and *2001* end ambiguously and cyclically with the birth or imminent arrival of a child. El Topo's son rides off with his late father's pregnant lover, and their baby, like the Star Child, offers hope for the future. However, El Topo's son's appropriation of his father's black costume suggests the cycle of violence and self-discovery will begin again—something also suggestive in the ambiguity of the Star Child's gaze (which is matched at the start of Kubrick's next film, *A Clockwork Orange* [1971] by the malevolent stare of Alex [Malcolm McDowell]).

Alejandro Jodorowsky, Samuel Beckett, and *El Topo*

If the surface of *El Topo* offers a pastiche of Western imagery, symbols, and mythologies, at a deeper level the film is informed by Jodorowsky's time in Paris during the early 1950s. At this time he mixed with the postwar liberal intellectual elite (Andre Breton, the "Pope of Surrealism"; Samuel Beckett; Marcel Marceau et al.) and collaborated with Fernando Arrabal in the Panic Movement (through which emerge the influence of Artaud and Beckett). Jodorowsky told Klaus Bisenbach:

> In '53 I left for Paris. I wanted to know Andre Breton because of surrealism and Marcel [Marceau] because I wanted to be a mime. Marcel was a genius mime, but not so intelligent. Myself, I was not so good a mime, but I was very intelligent. I say to him, "You are making an imitation of Charlie Chaplin. Why don't you make a metaphysical pantomime?" And then I composed *The Mask Maker* and *The Cage* [two mime routines] for him. I was a writer for him. But I did what I wanted. I also studied philosophy at the Sorbonne. Then I saw Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and I wanted to do theatre. (2012)

We might speculate that this interest in mime, masks, and pantomime lays a foundation for the way Jodorowsky uses the framework of the Western and its aesthetic as a costume for his film, and for the array of grotesques and carnival imagery he confronts the audience with. Jodorowsky had lived in postwar Paris in the early 1950s and had been exposed to changing cultural landscape of the city scarred not only by occupation but also by the violence of liberation, and by the creative voices which this landscape had provoked and over which hung

the legacy of Antonin Artaud (who had died in 1948 at the clinic of Ivry-Sur-Seine after having experienced nine years of asylum internment, insulin therapy, withdrawal from laudanum, and over fifty sessions of electro shock therapy) and the Theatre of Cruelty, Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett. The influence of this milieu and zeitgeist in *El Topo* results in the concerns of two separate countercultural traditions—those of postwar Europe and the transgressive Theatres of Cruelty and the Absurd and the acid soaked countercultural landscape of the late 1960s and early 1970s (during which period Artaud was undergoing a cultural renaissance amid contemporary creative and experimental voices of the underground)—being drawn together in one cinematic landscape.

Jodorowsky had formed a creative theatrical partnership with dramatist Fernando Arrabal (he had relocated to Mexico in the late 1950s) as cofounder of the Panic Movement in 1962, which as Doyle Greene reminds us:

> Was a deliberate effort to put Antonin Artaud's theories of the Theatre of Cruelty into practice. . . . The Theatre of Cruelty had demolished the conventions of Western Theatre—characterization, dialogue, realism, narrative and good taste in favour of intense spectacle that assaulted and bombarded the viewer's senses with disorienting, provocative, often violent and sexual imagery. . . . However Artaud's conception of the Theatre of Cruelty was not merely intended to simply batter and bewilder and offend the viewers with images of sex and violence, it was a deliberate attempt to stir and awaken all that was hidden and forbidden in the spectator's consciousness—a cathartic, even ceremonial spectacle intended to drastically and permanently transform the viewer's psyche. (2007: 8)

Jodorowsky's cinematic output is an attempt to succeed where Artaud had failed, in transferring this project to the realm of the cinematic (where Artaud had envisioned his project heading). Arrabal, had struck up a close friendship with Beckett in the late 1950s after the latter had garnered fame with *Waiting for Godot*. Furthermore, as Greene also reminds us, in-between relocating to Mexico in the late 1950s and returning to France to work with Arrabal in 1962, Jodorowsky "established himself as a force in avant garde theatre" (2007: 8), which included staging Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Greene proposes that

> it was in this cultural context, the "shift towards post-modern consciousness and cultural fusion" that the nomad-hippie-artist-philosopher par excellence, Alejandro Jodorowsky began his filmmaking career. His debut film *Fernando Y Lis* (1967), was a loose adaptation of a play by Arrabal first staged and directed by Jodorowsky in the days of the Parisian Panic Movement. *Fernando Y Lis*

> chronicled the aimless journey of Fando and his paralysed lover *Lis,* in search of the mythological city of Tar, a place they never locate, replacing Beckett's absurdist comedy with the patented and provocative scenes of sex and violent characterisation of both Jodorowsky and Arrabal's work. (2007: 9)

Beckett's early dramas *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* (1958), and *Happy Days* are distinguished by the presentation of imprisoning, empty, desolate spaces and environments. In *Waiting for Godot*, two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, interminably wait on a lonely road for a figure who may or may not arrive; *Endgame* takes place inside a shelter. What has happened outside remains a mysterious, possibly apocalyptic space. The blind, tyrannical, wheelchair bound Hamm exerts his control over his servant Clov, on whom he depends for food and survival, while his two aging parents, Nagg and Nell, live in dustbins. And as discussed earlier, *Happy Days* depicts the character of Winnie buried up to her waist in sand under the burning sun. Beckett's plays deal with postwar space and the annihilated landscape of Europe. Beckett himself had worked for a resistance cell during the war, which had been infiltrated and decimated by the Nazis; his comrades had been rounded up and executed or sent to internment or concentration camps while Beckett himself had escaped to Roussillon—an area with distinctive desert like sand dunes—in the unoccupied zone of Southern France (Knowlson 1996: 319). Characters in his later plays, such as *Not I* (1973), evanesce into nothingness in their search for personal subjectivity, identity, and self-determination within the empty void of the stage. In *El Topo* Jodorowsky deliberately intersperses the film's landscape with image taken from Beckett's plays.

The film opens with a series of images that recall both *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days*. *El Topo* emerges from the desert on horseback carrying a black parasol á la Winnie from *Happy Days* (whose parasol catches fire beneath the burning sun). Greene further links this image to the cultural space of postwar Europe when he observes that

> despite all of Jodorowsky's avant-garde window dressing, *El Topo* is very much within certain traditions of the Western: a figure riding a horse in expansive landscape. However one is immediately struck by the incongruities between the image and the Western proper, not the least of which being that the figure inexplicably and humorously totes an umbrella in the desert—a Western depicted by Rene Magritte or Luis Bunuel. (2007: 13)

The empty space of this arid desert contains a single post (upon which El Topo hangs his hat) which deliberately recalls the desolate dead tree which stands at

the center of *Waiting for Godot*'s mise-en-scène (and which had been sculpturally designed for the original performance of the play the artist Alberto Giacometti). El Topo instructs his young son, Brontis, to enter manhood by burying a toy and a picture of the mother beneath the sand (the boy begins the film naked but will end the film in the iconic clothes his father wore in this scene). This is the first instance in the film where we see a body encased, submerged in, and emerging out of the landscape: as *El Topo* and his son ride away, the photograph of the mother is pushed to the fore of the frame, her head emerging from the hot sand, just as Winnie's does in Act 2 of *Happy Days*.

Later in the first movement of the film Beckett is recalled during the sequence in which we are introduced to the Colonel and Maria. The sequence takes place in a desert "mission": a conical structure (which recalls the shelter in *Endgame*). A chapter of monks have been displaced from the mission, which has been colonized by Colonel. (The monks are subsequently tortured and sexually abused by the Colonel's three grotesque gunfighters.) Within this architectural structure Maria and the Colonel exist in a power dynamic of master and servant which also recalls Hamm and Clov's relationship in *Endgame* and the dynamic of Pozzo and Lucky's relationship in *Waiting for Godot*. This power dynamic will eventually be reversed when El Topo castrates the Colonel, just as it is in *Endgame*—which ends with Clov about to leave the shelter, therefore condemning previously dominant Hamm to certain death—and in Act 2 of *Waiting for Godot* which sees Pozzo and Lucky's return and the reversal of their own cruel master and servant relationship.

If Beckett's plays are (in part) defined through characters who are anchored to or unable to escape their environments, then in *El Topo*, the environment is a similarly imprisoning void. The film's landscape is frequently allowed to fill the screen; in his framing of the landscape, Jodorowsky presents a prominent frontier via the presence of strong horizon lines between the land and the sky, which bisect the screen. And characters are repeatedly shown emerging from the landscape: later in the film we are shown El Topo and others buried beneath the desert and in the film's finale the exiled cripples and deformed persons submerged underground escape from their cave and descend upon the "Wild West Town," presented like the zombies in George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). If *El Topo* incorporates Beckettian imagery into the Western genre, then one might argue that it does so to elevate the genre and give it "literary resonance." Jodorowsky recognizes the inherent Beckettian existential isolation implicit particularly in later postwar Westerns, and we may note here briefly a

set of contemporary Western texts which pay homage not only to Beckett but also to Jodorowsky.

Bone Tomahawk (S. Craig Zahler, 2015), a film which also combines the Western with the exploitation horror/cannibal film, opens with a conscious reference to *Waiting for Godot* as two violent drifters, murderous Vladimir and Estragon types (they wear similar hats), occupy a quiet desert clearing, at the center of which is a dead tree, as they loot the belongings of their victims. The writings of Cormac McCarthy present a series of apocalyptic and dystopic representations of the American landscape, and the 2006 novel *The Road* (made into a film in 2009 by John Hillcoat) is of particular interest. In his review of the novel, Ron Charles observes that

> in Cormac McCarthy's new novel, *The Road*, the bloodbath is finally complete. The violence that animated his great Western novels has been superseded by a flash of nuclear annihilation, which also blasts away some of what we expect from the reclusive author's work. With this apocalyptic tale, McCarthy has moved into the allegorical realm of Samuel Beckett and José Saramago—and, weirdly, George Romero (2006).

Furthermore cultish TV megahits *Westworld* (HBO, 2016–) and *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–) both allude to *El Topo:* the former in its presentation of a violent black clad gunslinger and the latter in which its two central characters, Sherriff Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) and his young son Carl (Chandler Riggs) wander a bleak and apocalyptic landscape, encountering in picaresque fashion, various desolate fighters, survivors, and grotesques. Echoing events depicted in *El Topo*, young Carl dons his father's wide-brimmed hat and after the death of his mother, he must learn to put away childish things and modes of behavior (a key test being the ability to kill a man).

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a critical reading of the cultural and contextual landscapes found in Alejandro Jodorowsky's cult Western *El Topo*. I have argued that the film's landscape is actually an empty interpretive space that Jodorowsky invites the viewer to fill with meaning. The viewer is aided in this task by the diverse mythological and religious symbolism that Jodorowsky loaded the landscape with. It is a landscape as informed by Beckett, Eliot, and Artaud as

much as it is by the landscape of the Western genre. Ultimately, Jodorowsky's appropriation of the genre's cinematic tropes presents a space that is ripe for exploring and deconstructing a set of real, imagined, cosmic, and cinematic myths that are embodied through El Topo's own picaresque, metamorphosing, and ultimately cyclical journey of discovery.

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