

# FRAMING LANDSCAPE: FILM AND GEOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCES OF THE PLACE

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## ABSTRACT

Within cultural geography, film, place, and landscape are representational practices sharing a similar dimension of living and experiencing the world. Accordingly, films, with their panoramic landscape's imagery and the camera's various points of views on the specificities of places, landscapes, and events, give places a distinctive meaning. Therefore, the objective of this article is to discuss the ways in which Pernambuco filmmakers make their films unique in terms of a new way of imagining the landscape and place working between the regionalist and non-regionalist imaginary. So, this article explores the contrasting poetic experience of the Brazilian northeast semi-arid landscape and place in films such as *Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures* (*Cinema, Aspirinas e Urubus*, Marcelo Gomes, 2005) and *Arid Movie* (*Árido Movie*, Lício Ferreira, 2006).

**KEYWORDS:** Place, Landscape, Brazilian northeast semi-arid, Film.

## ENQUADRANDO A PAISAGEM: EXPERIÊNCIAS FÍLMICAS E GEOGRÁFICAS DO LUGAR

## RESUMO

No contexto da geografia cultural, filme, lugar e paisagem são práticas representacionais que partilham uma dimensão semelhante de viver e experienciar o mundo. Assim, os filmes, com as suas imagens panorâmicas da paisagem e os vários pontos de vista sobre as especificidades dos lugares, paisagens e acontecimentos, conferem aos lugares um significado distinto. Portanto, o objetivo deste artigo é discutir as formas pelas quais os cineastas pernambucanos tornam seus filmes singulares no que se referem a uma nova forma de imaginar a paisagem e o lugar trabalhando entre o imaginário regionalista e não-regionalista. Assim, este artigo explora a contrastante experiência poética da paisagem e do lugar no sertão nordestino em filmes como *Cinema, Aspirinas e Urubus* (Marcelo Gomes, 2005) e *Árido Filme* (Lício Ferreira, 2006).

**Palavras-Chave:** Lugar, Paisagem, Sertão Nordeste Brasileiro, Filme.

## ENMARCANDO EL PAISAJE: CINE Y EXPERIENCIAS GEOGRÁFICAS DEL LUGAR

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## RESUMEN

En el contexto de la geografía cultural, el cine, el lugar y el paisaje son prácticas de representación que comparten una dimensión similar de vivir y experimentar el mundo. Así, las películas, con sus imágenes panorámicas del paisaje y los diversos puntos de vista sobre las especificidades de lugares, paisajes y acontecimientos, dan a los lugares un significado distinto. Por lo tanto, el objetivo de este artículo es discutir las formas en que los cineastas pernambucanos hacen que sus películas sean únicas en términos de una nueva forma de imaginar el paisaje y el lugar trabajando entre el imaginario regionalista y no regionalista. Así, este artículo explora la experiencia poética contrastante de paisaje y lugar en el interior nororiental en películas como *Cine, Aspirinas e Urubus* (Marcelo Gomes, 2005) y *Árido Filme* (Lírio Ferreira, 2006).

**PALABRAS-CLAVE:** Lugar, Paisaje, Sertón del Nordeste brasileño, Película.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Films, with their panoramic landscape's imagery and the camera's various points of views on the specificities of places, landscapes, and events, give places a distinctive meaning. By their aesthetics' configuration diversity, films call attention to places and landscapes' specifics and people's individual experiences. Whatever the filmmaker's vision – an objective or a subjective perspective of reality –, there is a comprehensive understanding of place, that is, like Tuan's (1977) and Entrikin's (1991), the location of objects in the world becomes meaningful as contextualized within human action and the landscape setting in the view.

Films have represented the world often using the imagery of landscapes to establish 'a place of sensorial perception' that connects it with reality's experience. The relation between the real and the filmic landscapes follows an existent connection between the *geographical place* and the *narrative place* (Oliveira Jr., 2012) which directly results from the relation between the real and the film landscapes. The film's spectators are the ones who geographically locate the structures of the film landscapes understanding them from association with the real landscape. So, within this context, this article is justified by the understanding that film can produce new formats of spaces, landscapes, and places as it creates new visibilities and new geographical typologies – constituted by and from the collective imagination associated with spaces, landscapes and places that are inhabited and known.

Film's recollection of setting, places, and their landscapes, turns them accessible to contemplation and reflection. Thus, one can argue that film's function is to give visibility to intimate past and present (and future) experiences, and this includes those of place and landscape. Film draws attention to some experiences that may otherwise fail to be noticed. So,

when Tuan states that ‘Identity of place is achieved by dramatizing the aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life.’ (p.178), one can identify in films one of the many ways of ‘dramatizing’ life, place, and landscape in the world.

The aim here is therefore, to discuss the ways in which Pernambuco filmmakers make their films unique in terms of a new way of imagining the landscape and place working between the regionalist and non-regionalist imaginary. So, this article explores the contrasting poetic experience of the Brazilian northeast semi-arid landscape and place in films such as *Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures* (*Cinema, Aspirinas e Urubus*, Marcelo Gomes, 2005) and *Arid Movie* (*Árido Movie*, Lírio Ferreira, 2006). This article’s relevance is that it presents an original analysis of these two films drawing attention to the fact that the aesthetic and poetic power of landscape consists of an ambivalence towards the sense and imagination of place, in this case the Northeast Region of Brazil and its strong reality present in the northeaster’s imagination about place.

Moreover, the choice to discuss about the two films mentioned above is because the frequency of films produced in the state of Pernambuco stood out as an important space for Brazilian film production. The financial encouragement of the state and municipal government to the film production, the positive reception by the public and critics at national and international cinema festivals, and particularly the *brodagem* (NOGUEIRA, 2009, 2014; SILVA, 2015)<sup>3</sup>, made Pernambuco’s cinema special.

What also makes Pernambuco’s films out of the ordinariness are their thematic and stylistic ways of featuring place. For instance: as urban and modernity considerations engage in either natural environments or historical contexts – as in *Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures* (2005). In this case, the landscape of the semi-arid northeast is ‘invaded by the modern’ as through the soundtrack from the *Manguebeat* music genre or through the introduction of a ‘foreign’ element into the natural world (SILVA, 2015): the German guy that drives around the northeastern semi-arid region presenting and selling aspirins. The notion of an urban modernity is also present. In *Arid Movie* (2005) the film narrative discusses on the urban space inequalities and the daily problems relating to human life in big cities giving the film a universal and cosmopolitan character.

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<sup>3</sup> It is, according to Nogueira (2014), a collaborative mode of production based on a game of affections, interests or disaffections that was consolidated from the 1990s through groups of self-taught filmmakers. The term comes from the English word ‘brother’ and designates according to the author “brotherhood” (group of friends) or camaraderie (in the case of a favor).

Generally, Pernambuco films have in common a continuous criticism of society that is embodied either through excluded landscapes, or in hegemonic landscapes. They do not fail to criticize society, presenting the vicissitudes, conflicts, contradictions, and tensions of the low and middle classes. A contesting discourse is manifested and expressed through landscape and place in these films as an alternative mode of focusing on plurality and cultural diversity, diverse spatiality and sociability.

There is supposedly a rupture, or a discontinuity with the regionalist imagery, in literature and film, that has been for so long reproducing a rural Northeast in ruins or as a space of longing for a more prosperous past – that of the oligarchies from the monoculture of sugarcane, – of which Albuquerque Junior (2011) eloquently says it served as a basis for the maintenance of agrarian elites in power.

What is seen in the contemporary films produced in Pernambuco, on the contrary, is the intention to break with the notion of the rural, the traditional and the regional – even when the film narratives are in the rural areas. It is also noticeable the way in which those films portray the ways of life of their characters, their problems supposedly inherited to life in a metropolis, or by the way they are denouncing and questioning the urban model. A modern spatiality delimits these films objects breaking with the spatiality that was outlined in regionalism.

Pernambuco's film production emerges from the will of a group of filmmakers to create a political, conceptual, and authorial cinema (NOGUEIRA, 2009, 2014). Therefore, they sought new ways of seeing (and representing) space, landscape, and place by renewing and reinventing the popular imaginary about specific places – re-thematizing spaces and landscapes which belong to the Brazilian Northeast region they came close to enabling an original sense of place.

The main argument here is that Pernambuco's contemporary films deconstruct the previous discourses about the Brazilian Northeast Region and its regional 'looks' by constructing an antiessentialist spatial imaginary based on the possibility of multiplicity (MASSEY, 2013). This spatial imaginary of the place is constructed through a landscape where the characters are affected in and by the encounter of their bodies with certain natural, rural, and urban spatiality, and these encounters produce positive and/or negative affections that would be related to that spatiality and their respective experiences of different places.

So, accessing this spatial experience means discovering the world in its many forms (sometimes oppressive and perverse reality) through the senses. Places are spaces that produce certain affections; they arise from ordinary experiences related to daily life and can be denied,

facilitated, or even transgressed by anyone regardless. Within this context, the suggestion here is to understand film narrative place as a landscape experience, which is spatial and temporal, allowing thinking about place as a cultural product.

## 2. PLACE AND LANDSCAPE

Within cultural geography, film, place, and landscape are representational practices sharing a similar dimension of living and experiencing the world. If Entrikin (1991) generally draws attention to the fact that ‘Place presents itself to us as a condition of human experience’ (p.1), raising the idea that social and economic factors and forces form places (and their appearance), and in turn are shaped by places, Cresswell (1996) describes *place* in terms of three elements: *location*, *locale*, and *sense of place*. He explains that *location* is a point in space with certain relations to other points in space, *locale* refers ‘[...] to a broader context of social relations’, and *sense of place* refers ‘to subjective feelings associated with a place’ (p.156). Therefore, in Cresswell’s analysis *place* is a ‘phenomenological experiential’ entity that combines nature (elemental forces), social relations (class, gender, and so on), and meaning (intellect, ideas, symbols). In this sense, the ‘experience of place’, from a phenomenological perspective, must simultaneously contain all three realms, each of which affects the actions in place. That is why a broader and definitive understanding of place goes towards the notion defended by Tuan (1977) that ‘Place is an organized world of meaning’ (p.179).

It is indisputable that landscape in film has a spatial function in representing space: as the location for some unfolding action (setting); as a space of aesthetic contemplation and spectacle (landscape). Accordingly, Martin Lefebvre (2006), following Consgrrove’s (1998) ideas, explains that the meaning of ‘landscape’ can refer at times ‘to the pictorial *representation* of a space and at other times to the real *perception* of a space’ (p.20).

Lefebvre argues for a differentiation between *setting* and *landscape*. *Setting* being the space where the story and event take place that is indispensable to any representation or discourse recounting any action (LEFEBVRE, 2006). Converting setting into landscape, to attain what can be called *filmic landscape*, has being a matter of articulating the look of the camera and the characters on the landscape. So, filmic landscape emerges from a space that has certain autonomy from the narrative through the spectator’s ‘landscape gaze’. Places in film derive from actual environment, from ‘real’ landscape, thus, an analysis of the concept of place reveals insights into the way place and landscape constitute the world’s experience and

visuality.

Film narratives call attention to the way in which landscape is operated to structure a tense normative place – the way in which ideas and feelings about what is right, wrong, just, unjust, and appropriate are transmitted through the link between landscape and place proving Cresswell's (1996) argument that places have more than one meaning at different times – some meanings can be completely distinct, complementary, intertextual as their landscape change. Accordingly, it can be argued that also the 'filmic place experience' depends on a narrative discourse of power centered in a film construction of landscape and place experiences. Thus, place is an experience and, as such, it is a phenomenon that relates intrinsically to a landscape experience. For this reason, the understanding is that film contributes to the way geographical landscapes and places are understood and imagined to the extent that the film frames are part of a narrative logic that is essentially temporal, spatial, and geographical. Film narrative does not only portray landscapes and places but also makes sensitive the experience of place.

Experiences *of* and *in* place are closely related with certain landscapes that are seen from a certain point of view giving a unique experience to both filmic and real place. This leads to the possibility of thinking about a series of different landscapes that would emanate from these experiences. Films bring about a large and diverse collection of experiences of landscape and place as they produce different encounters of the characters with the space around them. Additionally, Edensor (2002) calls attention to the structure of feeling of place that can be coded in films interested on the effectiveness of the experience of place. Being place a matter of both material and subjective experiences, spatial experiences are in well-known habitats, and in institutionalized settings, so, they exist in the structure of feeling stimulated by a complex of everyday living, personal belongings and collective memory (EDENSOR, 2002).

It is important to consider Ingold's (2022) understanding about the human's 'shaping perception' that converts the world into the kind of vista that we recognize as a landscape imposing a design within which perceiving *is* imagining, '[...] because the world that is perceived is continually brought forth, or called into being, in the very act of imagination.' (p.35). Applying Ingold's views on landscape to film landscape we can consider that in this world, an imagined landscape (in film), is then a landscape not of being but of becoming because a perceived landscape is equivalent to imagining it. Moreover, 'Landscape is *both* – both performative sensorium *and* site and source of cultural meaning and symbolism.' (p.161)

Taking the above discussion into account, it is worth point out that film, as an act of



representing is understood to be *in* and *of* the world of embodied practice and performance, rather than taking place outside of the world. Accordingly, film is a way of seeing, thinking, processing, and performing the physical world. Thus, film affects and produces landscapes and places images that directly affect not only the film characters but also the viewers. Understanding that film fiction and the real world are not so rigidly distinguished (DELEUZE, 2005; OLIVEIRA JR., 2012), it must be said that the films analyzed here, build an experience of time through semi-arid spatial images, in which the characters seek to reconnect with nature - their movements in space are important for the understanding to how the representation of the northeastern is mediated, textualized, constructed and imagined.

Moreover, landscape, and specifically film landscape, should not be understood just as the representation of space, but also as lived place: as real and, at the same time, imaginary (LEFEBVRE, 2006), because film is not only a visual construction of landscapes, but also a way of producing imagining places. Within this perspective, it can be concluded that the concept of place within film is activated by the landscape and the encounter of the characters within it mediated by different types of spaces and discourses that these places necessarily (re)produce. In other words, as fiction films create a place on its own dimension, the everyday, ordinary place that exists in 'real' life is also a sort of imaginary template that activates the identity of both the real and fictional places.

The films directed by Pernambuco's filmmakers are neither just mirrors or reflections of geographical space, nor only a realistic representation of historical and political processes. They generate certain points of view that in some manner condition the way landscape and place should be looked at. These films, reflecting cultural references and at the same time rupturing and reproducing a regionalist geographic imaginary, introduces into the landscape a variety of place experiences that enclose place imagination and discourse. They build an open, multiple, and dynamic landscape that is political because it inquiries about the places represented, because they provoke reflection about the places and, above all, because they build further ways of imagining the landscapes and places they represent.

Understanding place and landscape through the historical and personal narratives that are marked out within it and that give that place a particular unity establishing a particular set or possibilities within it, landscape and place serves methodologically here as frameworks to analyze the film characters' experiences – their encounter within the landscapes, their

experiences of fear, otherness, repression, freedom, strangeness, placeness and placenessless. The main argument is that *Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures* and *Arid Movie* deconstruct the previous discourses about the Brazilian Northeast Region and its regional ‘looks’ by constructing an imaginary of the place through a landscape where the characters are affected in and by the encounter of their bodies with certain natural, arid spatiality, and these encounters produce positive and/or negative affections that would be related to those spatiality and their respective experiences of different places.

The main relevance of the analysis presented here is that looking at the two films mentioned above, one can draw attention to the fact that the aesthetic and poetic power of water, to give an example, consists of an ambivalence: on the one hand, there is the aridity and lack of water, symbolizing the lack of life, on the other, the rivers and the vegetation green, symbolizing life and rebirth. Water can be associated with images linked to death – this is the case of dark, stagnant, heavy, deep and dormant waters, but also images linked to life, fertility, birth, and rebirth. The poetic images of water are strongly present in reality and in the northeaster’s imagination, occupying both a political and a mystical dimension.

A certain way of seeing the semi-arid arid region, punished by drought, constitute the regional imaginary within Brazilian literature and film representations (ALBUQUERQUE JR., 2011). Images that are repeated or updated, such as that of a permanently dry land, with animal bones on the side of the roads, hunger, lots of people migrating from there to more prosperous regions in search of better living conditions and religious fanaticism, become part of a recurrent imagery related to this part of the country landscape. However, the films mentioned above have broken with this imagery showing another face (that is also real) of it: the green semi-arid during the rainy season; the top of the mountains; irrigation system placed by fruit growing industries – grapes, for example, are grown by a wine company in the São Francisco River Valley –, that turn the semi-arid into a new productive circuit linked to the international market. This ‘new look’ at the semi-arid reflects and refers to different ways of seeing the geography of the place and, consequently, to the appearance of the landscape related to that region which has to do with the element of water.

First, during long periods of drought, vegetation loses its leaves, falls asleep and dies to survive the long dry period. Temporary rivers dry up completely, leaving no trace of life, turning to sand and gravel. In addition, the scarcity of water (and food) impacts on the northeastern imaginary driving some to religious fanaticism, mysticism, and into believe on



prophecies such as ‘the semi-arid will turn into the sea and the sea will turn into the semi-arid’. Then, with the first rains, the shrubby vegetation that covers the depressions and the hills, previously squalid and brown in a long stage of lethargy (a process like hibernation for the plants of the *Caatinga*), turn green again. The intermittent rivers transformed into dry and stony paths, are reborn and reappear with water. The dams fill and overflow, they bleed, bringing new life to the place.

A natural space like the northeast dry semi-arid is the landscape against which the experiences of place are interconnected with, and inseparable from, economic, political and cultural factors. *Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures* and *Arid Movie* bring about a new policy for the place, going beyond the traditional ways of seeing the Brazilian Northeast region. The semi-arid is therefore not just a rustic, mythical space, filled with an exacerbated religiosity and a conservative, patriarchal and sexist society, although these elements are still very present in the films, but is also a place open to other spatial visions which offer different affections, experiences, and possibilities. It is worth mentioning the ‘estrangement’ that emerges from the human contact with the vastness of the desolate and arid land’s depressions that stands out in space, and the landscape commonly takes a ‘ghostly form’ as its rocks have a similar shape to the ruins, almost like reminders of a geological past.

It is like an existential geology in which the materiality of natural physical space, and the existential geology of the human in space assume a preponderant role in the poetics of the landscape. In other words, the hardness, aridity, and roughness of this physical setting, populated by rocks in the vastness of its ‘empty’ space, produce a powerful landscape’s poetics that deals with the human experiences. These experiences call attention to landscapes of intermittency caused by intervals between periods of drought and periods of rain, and by the temporary rivers that appears and disappear depending on the weather. Thus, these films present a landscape that is not only squalid and atrophied by drought and misery, but one that opens many possibilities for human spatial experience, imagination and, certainly for an existential encounter with the world. In talking about an existential geology, these films call attention to the fact that humans, who live or travel through this semi-arid space, are affected by it.

In *Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures*, and *Arid Movie*, the estrangement is a feeling usually provoked in the character who is a visitor, a stranger, or a foreigner to the place: someone who comes from a big urban center, for example, and naturally has a distinct

experience of place. In the semi-arid landscape, the human experience defies contiguity, proximity, intimacy. The sensations of fear or security are distinct here insofar as the space itself is. In the semi-arid, individuals are faced with the grandeur of the open space that imposes itself. These films also comment on the reality of the landscape's 'rebirth' and existence which is also intermittent: after a long period of drought the dried rivers of the region reappear quickly with the first rain, and the grey vegetation turns green on the high plateaus. While the hardness of geology brings a sense not only of death, but of misery (to people), of inertia (of plants), of solidity (of the rocks), water represents a sign of life, of birth, rebirth and purification. Finally, it is precisely by bringing these spatial experiences, in which the characters are affected by this poetic materiality that resides in the landscape, that these films can construct a politics of place: inverting certain values, updating certain images and, above all, producing a new imaginary and a new spatiality that breaks with former ways of seeing this landscape.

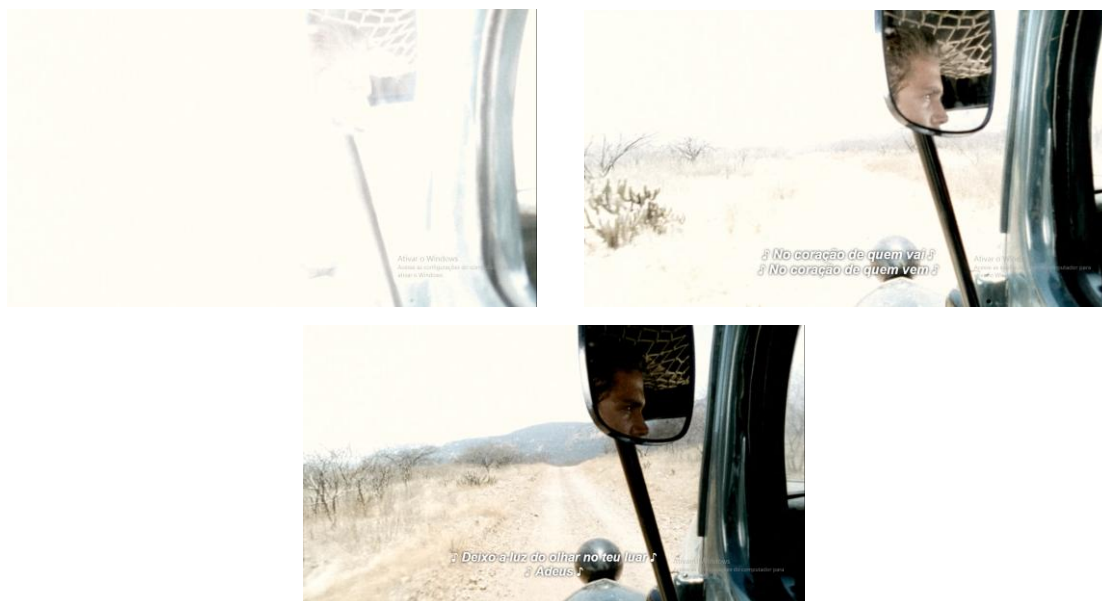
### 3. SEMI-ARID LANDSCAPE AND PLACE

The Brazilian northeastern semi-arid and its ancient geology give the notion of an eternal timeless experience, the environment also provokes an experience of discontinuity. The semi-arid landscape is eternal, perennial, monotonous and, at the same time, intermittent, temporary – an interval between dry periods and green periods. The semi-arid landscape can be considered under a bipolarized view: on the one hand, it is a landscape that imposes itself with its temporality, the grandeur of its 'endless' land – what provoke experiences of loneliness, desolation and oblivion in the characters. On the other hand, it is a landscape that provokes or affects human experiences through the transience, instability, incompleteness, identity which are characteristics of the place.

Intermittently, the dry semi-arid returns to life, turns green, and the rivers that had disappeared during the drought period reappear quickly. The human landscape also changes, life becomes less hard, more cheerful, less melancholic, or gray. Although intermittency is a typical characteristic of the northeastern semi-arid landscapes, it is the brownish-white, aridity of the lifeless desert that is still very much linked and rooted in the Northeastern collective imagination. Consequently, they are always portrayed as bearers of a rough, ignorant, rude countenance, as a hick. This traditional portrait of the northeasters as provincial people has been commonly and repeatedly presented in several Brazilian literary and filmic works.

The monotony of the place, in the vastness of Pernambuco's semi-arid region, is significantly portrayed by the brownish-white photography that frames the constant aridity and dryness of the semi-arid landscape in the road movie *Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures* (2005). The film opens with a white screen that is slowly taken by the immensity of the semi-arid landscape image. (Figure 1) In this first sequence, we see one of the main characters, through his reflection in the rearview mirror of the truck he is driving. He gets out of the truck, observes the dry bed of a river from the top of a bridge and picks up a boulder from the ground, examines it and puts it away. *'Everything in this place seems to have dried up'*. The construction of shots, placing the character within the landscape composition, as revealed later in the film, works as a metaphor for the duality of the character's feelings towards his past and present life. This moment of the encounter with the place, and with himself, is also an encounter with the realization that his body has been affected by the temporality and spatiality of the environment.

**Figure 01: the whitish image shows the excessive luminosity of the semi-arid landscape.**



*Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures* takes place in 1942. Johann (Peter Ketnath), a German who flees to Brazil before the outbreak of World War II, *'where bombs don't fall from the sky'*, to sell a new drug, the analgesic Aspirin, travelling through the Pernambuco's semi-arid region. To promote *'the end of all evils'*, he sets up a screen on which he projects tourist and propaganda films. In his truck, he gives rides to different people wherever he goes. One of them is Ranulpho (João Miguel), the resident of a small village, with a bitter temper, who wants to leave that

meager, monochromatic, monotonous life in the *sertão* to start a new and prosperous life in Rio de Janeiro (the capital of Brazil at that time). Johann hires Ranulpho as his helper and they become friends.

Ranulpho is part of the environment that, he understands, stands for misery and underdevelopment, and is an extensive place unknown and forgotten by many. That is why he says: *'Here, not even war comes!'* As a result, the character is looking for a way to transform his reality. Going through an identity crisis, Ranulpho understands that he cannot sit still. He recognizes that is through mobility, traveling around the place, that he will finally appreciate himself. When Johann asks him: *'Are you travel a lot?'* he replies: *'Only when I'm working'*. Ranulpho's search is in the end a search for, moving through the landscape he belongs, more contact with people, with the Other, and additionally with a different culture (that resulted from his relationship with the Johann).

In *Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures*, shots of the truck are intercalated with shots and sequences that mediate points-of-views of the landscape and the dialogues between the characters. The film medium-shots and panoramas reveal the road and the route of the 'aspirin truck'. The truck's paths are never on main roads, so, Johann is often lost and asking passers-by for directions. Johann, even though being German and being in the middle of the northeast region, tries to identify himself with the locals and the place. Even by evident cultural shock justified by antagonistic cultural traditions, Johann tries some strategies of communication with the locals, the northeasters he encounters on the road. He eats local food (the alternative would be canned food), talks to the local people, looks for information about the place, and never refuses giving a ride to anyone who asks.

The film evokes archaic values of the region in relation to the conditions of global technological modernity. The opposing thematic plot (past/present, archaic/modern) and geographies (local/global) are sketched through the feelings of displacement and the characters intentions to know each other, to identify themselves with and belonging to the place. Thus, *Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures* argues that the main characteristic of the northeasters is the perpetual journey for their own identity and that the means for this is through the encounter with the Other. The film seems to be talking about displacement, not necessarily the displacement related to escaping the semi-arid's water scarcity, but a broader history of displacement in space: migration, diaspora, etc.

The monotony of the semi-arid landscape composes a perfect setting for the spatial

experiences of the characters through their gaze. The whole film being shot in a grayish/whitish photography, representing the excessive luminosity of the place, ends up building a true landscape's experience by giving the feeling of aridity, dryness, and torrid heat to the place's imagery. The filmmaker Marcelo Gomes (2005) explains his choice in an interview:

I wanted to build the *sertão* of my affective memory, the *sertão* that I remember from my travels from a young age, which has caused me a very big impression. Those spatial silences and that light that looks like it will pierce my eyelids. I've figured that this German, coming from a temperate climate, arriving in the *sertão* for the first time, will have a photophobia problem, will see the *sertão* overexposed. But you have the northeastern that is fleeing from misery, from the *sertão* that is hot, arid, and dry, he can only see that. So are the visions of these two characters that permeates the landscape. And it was this white light that we've spent three months in the lab researching. It was a long search until I got to it. [My translation]<sup>4</sup>

The film has its premise not on being a portrait of the drought, and the hardships of living in the semi-arid region, but rather on discussing universal themes such as loneliness and friendship which are inserted within the northeastern semi-arid region backdrop. But, this backdrop, the physical scenario where the narrative action takes place, plays a major and active role, as it directly reflects the feelings of loneliness in the characters – in their encounter with the landscape affections are produced.

In one sequence, Ranulpho complains to Johann: *'if you give all these people a ride, we'll never reach the destination'*; Johann replies: *'but you also asked for a ride'*; to what Ranulpho says: *'but I'm different'*. For the Brazilian northeasterner, the semi-arid is overwhelming and indifferent, for Johann, a foreigner, the semi-arid is a different and diverse place – Johann's gaze contemplates the landscape in a different manner wanting to learn, in small details, about the food, people's work, and the space itself. The film makes clear that, in order to recognize himself as part of the northeastern's place and culture, Ranulpho needs Johann's outsider perspective. Ranulpho describes the landscape as uninteresting, boring, monotonous: *'here, at this end of the world place, even war does not come'*, to what Johann

<sup>4</sup> 'Eu queria construir o sertão da minha memória afetiva, o sertão que eu lembro das minhas viagens desde pequeno, que me causavam uma impressão muito grande, aqueles silêncios espaciais e aquela luz que parece que vai furar as pálpebras. Eu imaginei que esse alemão, vindo de um clima temperado, chegando no sertão pela primeira vez, vai ter esse problema de fotofobia, vai ver o sertão superexposto. Mas você tem o sertanejo que está fugindo da miséria, do sertão que é quente, árido e seco, ele só consegue ver isso. Então é a visão desses dois personagens que impregna a paisagem. E é essa luz branca que passamos três meses no laboratório pesquisando. Foi uma longa pesquisa até chegar a ela.'

replies: *'but at least there are no bombs falling from the sky'*. Ranulpho remains apart, indifferent, to the place, conserving his caustic and harsh personality, while Johann, willing to abandon his German past once and for all starting a new life far from the war, always keeps interest in what is different. It is through Johann's 'discovering' gaze that the film calls attention to the fact that one's approximation with nature and the local culture is a way of establishing a connection with himself.

*Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures* signifies place as an environment of meditation and purification. Crossing the semi-arid space, driving through its emptiness, hot and sunny days, dark and cold nights, this monotonous landscape make the two main characters face their uncertainty, anguish, insecurity, to finally being able to identify themselves in life. Ranulpho's and Johann's ordeal seems sometimes like a self-flagellation. In Johann's case, is the guilty for having left his home country to escape the army call to go to war. The loneliness of work in the semi-arid of Brazil looks like an act of penance. In the case of Ranulpho, the guilty is consequence of having taken so long to have the courage to leave the place. As the two men cross the region together, a mutual learning process becomes visible, and a change in attitude and behavior seems to happen.

The film's final sequence, at the train station, is quite significant. After having covered distant areas of the region, Johann decides to leave for an even deeper and isolated region than the semi-arid – the Amazon. Migrants are waiting at the station for the train that will take them to Recife and then to Manaus by ship. People who will probably never return to the northeastern semi-arid region, will lose ties and will come across landscapes that are completely foreign to those they know, will make contact with the Other, with the different, with those who inhabit the forest. Johann and Ranulpho say goodbye and probably won't see each other again for the rest of their lives. Ranulpho returns to the truck, starts the engine, and disappears into the gray semi-arid landscape.

Another travelling-like vision of the Pernambuco's semi-arid landscape can be seen in *Arid Movie* (2005). Set in contemporary times, this road-movie narrates about a road trip from the urban Recife to the rural region. *Arid Movie* tells the story of Jonas (Guilherme Weber), a journalist who lives in São Paulo and does the weather forecast on a well-known television news. After learning of his father's death, he is summoned by his relatives to go to the funeral in the small village in the interior of Pernambuco. Jonas flies from São Paulo to Recife, where he meets three old friends from when he was just a teenager, and then takes the



road from the capital to the fictional city of Vale do Rocha. During the bus ride to Vale do Rocha, at one of the bus stops, he meets the video maker Soledad (Giulia Gam) who gives him, and his friends, a ride in her car.

Soledad is also in transit, working on a documentary about the water scarcity in the semi-arid region. Investigating the politics of water and the mysticism surrounding this theme, Soledad is on her way to meet Meu Velho (José Celso Martinez Corrêa), an elderly man who embodies the figure of a prophet, lives isolated and claims to have access to water with magical, miraculous powers. Meanwhile, people from the community make their way to his home searching for ‘purification’ through his miraculous water. At the end, Soledad's journey, turning her into an observer of the northeast region’s archaic values, represents an expansion of her own boundaries, as she is displaced from her own social and temporal context, for understanding the place.

**Figure 02: Jonas immersed and contemplating the landscape in *Arid Movie***



However, it is the journalist's spatial experience that best reflects the effect of temporality and spatiality (Figure 2). Quoting Albert Camus's book *Stranger*, he states: ‘*I feel like a foreigner anywhere, even in my dreams*’. And, although he does not feel totally as an alien, as he has a vague memory, in his ‘photographic’ way, of the place, he cannot feel his

father's death – in the same way as the protagonist of Camus's book cannot feel his mother's death. At his family farm, Riacho Seco, in Vale do Rocha, Jonas meet with some family relatives who he no longer knew and his grandmother – they want to force him to kill the Indian who murdered his father. That is when he realizes: *'it's like I've lost something I've never had'*, and adds, *'I think this place has stopped in time'*. Jonas feels, throughout his journey, ambiguous: like a foreigner and at the same time not complete alien to the place because of his paternal roots. Before his arrival at Vale do Rocha, Jonas had an indifferent attitude towards the place.

Jonas finds himself back to a past that never belonged to him. He feels detached, displaced from the often-changing surroundings. In his mother's apartment in Recife, in the bar he goes for a drink with friends, or in Rocha Valley, Jonas feels a sense of lost, he is placeless; he experiences everything as it was for the first time, evidently demonstrating that he has never been there or in that situation before in his life; even less either related to or familiarized with the cultural codes and conventions of the place. These sentiments become very clear in the film sequences when he is riding a taxi arriving in Recife, or a bus on his way to Rocha Valley, or in Soledad's Land Rover. Here his vague gaze is noticed as Jonas always feels like a foreigner, a stranger to the reality he is experiencing. Despite his trip implying an approximation, or rapprochement (with his paternal roots), the immensity-landscape imposes itself and, contrary to what one might suppose, distances him even further from his relatives.

*Arid Movie* associates its aesthetic expression of the geographical and humanity of the semi-arid through some thematic representation often attached to the region – drought, misery, colonelism, mysticism, banditry, and the characters' identities such as the indigene and spiritual mentor, the video maker, the trio of marijuana smokers, the recreational-fundamentalists, etc. Here, the strategies of allusion are central for Jonas' displacement that reflects the process of diaspora by northeasterners who leave the region to other places, and when they return, they find a remaining archaic and stagnant universe despite modernization. This relates to the notion of the region's spatiality often leading to an overwhelming experience of being oppressed and diminished before the spatial immensity and vastness of the environment. The immense landscape of the semi-arid gives the viewer a feeling of being at the end of the world or 'in the middle of nowhere'. The undifferentiated semi-arid becomes, paraphrasing Deleuze (2005), 'any space', an undifferentiated space, an end-of-the-world landscape like any desert or open space, without topographical references, without time, without memory.

It is no longer the dry semi-arid of the Northeast, but any semi-arid whose destiny is to become nowhere. And here there is an inversion in the politics of the place: it is no longer about that essentialist and traditional vision based on the region's cultural identity, but on a semi-arid that dissolves in this nowhere, which becomes existentially semi-arid only. It is at that moment, with the loss of spatial references, that one has, paradoxically, a spatial empirical geographic and landscape experiences, like an experience of spatiality in a primitive state. The traditional northeastern semi-arid dissolves and fades even more when Jonas is invited by the owner of a bar, Jurandir (Luis Carlos Vasconcelos), to take a walk through the landscape of Catimbau National Park. Jurandir, a descendant of ancient Indians who inhabited the region, has a dialogue with Jonas about his ancestors, who used to inhabit the place. He talks about their relationship with nature and how little by little they lost their land (because they were not considered by local authorities as the owners of the land) and how they gradually disappeared.

Then, traveling through Catimbau Valley's 'magical landscape', known for its rupestrian paintings, Jurandir prepares a tea with supposedly hallucinogenic properties and offers it to Jonas. Under the hallucinogenic effect of the tea, Jonas has another experience with space and place. As his perception changes, the encounter of his body with the landscape raises other affections. Spatiality then gives rise to a hallucination-landscape or an enchantment-landscape where the spatial and temporal foundations that still existed are completely lost. Here perhaps the landscape reaches its climax with the subject's reinteraction with nature, with another place. Felling the hallucinogenic effects of the tea, Jonas has a change of feelings about the place. Instead of indifference, boredom, the 'blank mind' associated with a foreigner's gaze, he assumes an attitude of estrangement and astonishment – that he realizes are provoked by his contact with the Other – to the different and the unknown that results from the character's experience of the place. Through this experience Jonas' feeling of estrangement disappears and a landscape of enchantment arises. In the hallucination, his memories mixed with the landscape, Jonas reconnects with nature, with the place and with his own being.

## CONCLUSION

In both films *Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures* and *Arid Movie*, the place experience is poetic because it triggers a series of poetic images that are present and constantly updated in people's imagination. Film imageries have originality and materiality; they are linked to a poesis, which reveals a deeper relationship between the human being, nature and their

spatialities, consequently, with landscapes, and places. Therefore, in films, place experience can be poetic in addition of being aesthetic.

The geological temporality, the vastness, the grandeur, and the oblivion of the semi-arid, turns a static portrait of a landscape into an experience of place. These encounters with the place are still loaded with certain poetics that materially participate in these experiences. The place becomes an experience, a moment when the spatial bases are lost. Jonas does not distance himself, does not see the space from afar, on the contrary, it is about a reconciliation of what was split, separated. The characters are integrated into that spatiality; then space creates time, becoming, duration, landscape, place and experience in the semi-arid.

In short, the two films discussed here share themes related to the geological temporality, the vastness, the grandeur, and the oblivion of the semi-arid, turning a static portrait of a landscape into an experience of place. These encounters with the place are still loaded with certain poetics that materially participate in these experiences. The place becomes an experience, a moment when the spatial bases are lost. The characters do not distance themselves, do not see the space from afar, on the contrary, it is about a reconciliation of what was split, separated. The characters are integrated into that spatiality; then space creates time, becoming, duration, landscape, place, and experience in the semi-arid.

These films, by giving visibility to the place, confer a specific identity not only to the landscape, but to the place, exposing, reconfiguring and rearticulating new ways of seeing experiences, ideas, socio-spatial practices, and cultural resistances. They, therefore, function as a cultural mapping of the semi-arid landscape turning it into a place, mapping spatiality and temporalities that correspond to identity-based forms of understanding and meanings of space, and the human relationships and experiences that characterize the place socio-culturally.

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