

Nurturing Nature and Cinematic Experience: The Mythic American Landscape and the Rural Female Community

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In film today, the "Western" genre often fosters the mythic view of America as an untrammled Eden where European or American culture can regenerate or recreate itself. Despite the importance of the landscape, it is not always a subject or main character in the genre's traditional narrative. Westerns often depict the American countryside as though it were simply a gorgeous framing device for the film's male protagonists whose primary function is to transform rough rural culture into a civilized American one before they pass on to the next town. In contrast, in the rural female-centered films of American life--such as *Daughters of the Dust*, *Places in the Heart*, *Bagdad Café*, and *Passion Fish*--the landscape plays a central role. Nature, in fact, generally replaces the powerful male protagonist of the Western. But unlike European films which also highlight nature's regenerative power, such as *Antonia's Line* where the central female character challenges and changes both the male power structure and the sexual values of her repressive Dutch farming community; the American films center on the transformation of the woman. These films which exist in a mythic rural or small-town America, celebrate the Jeffersonian ideal of America as a garden community---one where the individual is regenerated by her ties to the land. She does not, in other words, conquer or "traipse through" the cowboy's wild Eden. The strictures and conformity which plague the suburbs do not exist in these rural places which celebrate female community and embrace difference.