

## TECHNOLOGICAL LANDSCAPES: ANTHROPOCENE AND TECHNICS IN LUCRECIA MARTEL'S *ZAMA*

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### Abstract:

This article examines the relationship between the Anthropocene and colonialism in Lucrecia Martel's 2017 film *Zama*. Building from diverse critiques of technology and the colonial underpinnings of the Anthropocene, such as Kathryn Yusoff and Martin Heidegger, this article examines how this film is a meditation on the colonial origins of the Anthropocene that takes humanity's purported mastery over nature to its limit and how this process is dependent on aesthetic representations and of processes of racialization. By examining the film's color, compositions, sound schemes, and the representation of natural elements, this article shows how the Anthropocene is not exclusively a product of the industrial revolution or the nuclear age, but an event that began during European colonial expansion. Furthermore, this article shows that the Anthropocene and its ensuing racialization have their roots in the ontological relation that renders every being as an object, including living beings, then racialized subjects, and eventually humanity, as always ready for consumption.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Lucrecia Martel, *Zama*, Argentinian cinema, technology

Lucrecia Martel's long-awaited *Zama* (2017), inspired by Antonio di Benedetto's 1956 novel, premiered nine years after her previous movie.<sup>1</sup> Personal issues delayed the film's completion, as Martel was forced to abandon the production of an adaptation of Hector Oesterheld's science-fiction graphic novel *El eterno*.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that the two films seem to be oppositional – *El eterno* portrays an alien invasion of Buenos Aires, and *Zama* depicts the margins of the Spanish Empire at the end of the 18th century –, compelling similarities between the two narratives arise. First, the tropes of heroism and discovery point towards an easily recognizable convergence between these two works that ostensibly belong to different genres. However, *Zama's* anti-heroic perspective of the Spanish presence in the Americas signals a critical parallel between science-fiction as a critique of colonialism rather than a celebration of modernity in which the role of ruthless invaders is displaced from other-worldly creatures onto European expansion. John Rieder has highlighted science-fiction's capacity to portray colonialism as visions of catastrophe that

appear in large part to be the symmetrical opposites of colonial ideology's fantasies of appropriation, so much so that the lexicon of science-fictional catastrophes might be considered profitably as the obverse of the celebratory narratives of exploration and discovery (123).<sup>3</sup>

In light of Rieder's assertion, *Zama* also rehearses a fundamental premise of science-fiction in which the origins of modern Latin American nations were based on the destruction of the forms of life of native and African populations through the use of superior technologies. Another point of convergence between representations of colonialism and science-fiction narratives about hyper-technification concerns the question of temporal perspectives. If science-fiction envisions a future extension of present technological advancements and reflects on how these tendencies have shaped our world, colonial narratives of the likes of *Zama* meditate on how past events project into the present and future.

Setting aside the parallels between *El eterno* and *Zama*, I focus on the latter's capacity to represent how the reinvention of Latin America's past during colonial expansion allows to question the current trajectory of modernity beyond the frame of national identity. If science-fiction helps us think about the current impacts of technology and the history of colonization allows us to grasp present-day ethnic exclusion, then *Zama's* portrayal of what European settlers saw as 'untamed nature' sheds light on modernity's relation towards an endangered natural world. In this regard, my intention is to step away from an interpretation of this film exclusively as a critic of colonialism. Instead, I will focus on how color, sound schemes, and natural elements such as natural landscapes, vegetation, animals, and eventually the racialized subjects historically associated with nature also illuminate how the othering of nature is dependent upon an aesthetic procedure and how this film presents a cinematic decentering of the modern subject that illuminates a link relationship between the Anthropocene and the experience of colonialism.

The term Anthropocene was first proposed to define a new geological era in which the transformation of the Earth is mostly caused by anthropogenic interventions (Crutzen and Stoermer). Contrary to the Holocene, the geological epoch that allowed human life to prosper, the intensity of our activities has, for the first time in natural history, caused more alterations to the environment than all-natural processes combined. While the first periodization of the Anthropocene located its origins in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of the industrial revolution, more recently, the beginning of this geological era is set in the decades following 1945 (McNeil and Engelke, 213).<sup>4</sup> As

1. While an analysis of the similarities and differences between Martel's and Di Benedetto's *Zama* could be interesting, this article focuses exclusively on the film. One of Martel's statements in an interview with Marchini Camia sheds light on this decision: "For me, it was important to stay true to what I perceived in the novel. I don't know if that's the actual novel, but it's what the novel provoked in me, and to that I was absolutely faithful. It's not interpretation, it's not adaptation, it's not translation [but] infection (45). As Gert Gemünden shows while this "literary infection" comments and expands on Di Benedetto's novel, is a stand-alone project that was inspired by the novel to comment on different topics more than a faithful adaptation.

2. Although Martel dedicated two years to the script of *El eterno*, the production was slowed down because of her struggle with cancer. Ultimately, the production was cancelled as Martel could not secure the funding for the project nor the graphic novel's copyright.

3. Rieder comments on science-fiction as a genre that reflects the anxieties related to colonialism: "Environmental devastation, species extinction, enslavement, plague, and genocide following in the wake of invasion by an alien civilization with vastly superior technology; all of these are not merely nightmares morbidly fixed upon by science fiction writers and readers, but are rather the bare historical record of what happened to non-European people and lands after being "discovered" by Europeans and integrated into Europe's economic and political arrangements from the fifteenth century to the present" (123-124.)

4. 1945 marks the beginning of the "Great Acceleration," a period of unprecedented growth in human population, use of resources, and environmental degradation. Other scientists have argued that this date also coincides with the beginning of the nuclear era, which forecasts the possibility of another event: "the Great Decoupling" (Steffen, et, al. 2015). This refers to the possibility of a collapse of natural systems that have supported economic and human development.

Kathryn Yusoff has noted, periodization, which relies on empirical data, is uncritical of the historical processes of colonization that forefront the Anthropocene. These ahistorical approaches present an undifferentiated Anthropos, an abstract idea of humanity, as the culprit of environmental degradation. In this regard, a movie like *Zama*, produced from Latin America's peripheral position, can destabilize abstract claims about humanity's undifferentiated responsibility for ecological degradation. Instead, this film points to how colonialist, patriarchal, and capitalist structures underpin the Anthropocene. However, by seeking to question these elisions regarding colonial history, Latin American cultural studies risk turning to oppressed indigenous and African cosmologies as a reserve of idealized practices and subjectivities to counter the destructive effects of this geological process. As pointed out by Carolyn Fornoff and Gisella Heffes, Latin Americanism faces the challenge of bringing together the "entwined history of the species and the planet at the same time that we do not abandon critical theories of race, gender, sexuality, colonialism, imperialism"(5). For these critics, the Anthropocene demands a return to cultural archives without being oblivious to natural history but by bearing in mind that these two histories are deeply interconnected. As both critics put it, it is not enough to raise a critique of capitalism—undoubtedly one of the main motors of environmental degradation—but to question 'ontologies, epistemologies, and praxis' (6) that underpin the systematic exploitation of life. By engaging with Martin Heidegger's and Yusoff's assessments of modern technique, I show that Latin American cultural productions such as *Zama* can destabilize the narratives of the origins of the Anthropocene. In addition to this, I will show that as much as the Anthropocene is a threat to our existence on the planet, this process also brings with it the anthropocentric notion that humans have mastery over nature to its limit.

### A Colonial Anthropocene

*Zama* describes the story of Diego de Zama, a functionary of the Spanish crown assigned to a remote outpost while he stoically awaits for a labyrinthine bureaucracy to allow him to relocate to Lerma with his family. Like many of the *criollos* and Spaniards in the movie, Zama derides the boredom of living in a place of little interest and disparages the African and indigenous with whom he inhabits the space—even as he fathers a son with a local woman in one of his many ways to game the administration.<sup>5</sup> Unlike narratives that denounce colonialism or try to grapple with its excesses from the vantage point of heroism, resistance, empathy, and adventure stories, life at the empire's margins seems as disconcerting as the legal structures of the Spanish empire.<sup>6</sup> As such, the interior spaces are far from sumptuous, cholera has come from the ships that are the only link with European civilization, and the new governor seems more interested in finding a way to exploit 'cocos,' rocks that hold precious metals on their inside. In addition to this, non-sensical rumors abound that a bandit, Vicuña Porto, will continue to terrorize the town.<sup>7</sup>

The last part of the movie shows how, as governors and bureaucrats are replaced, the protagonist joins an expedition to capture Vicuña Porto and gain the favor of the new governor. As the men are captured and released by an indigenous tribe and eventually find themselves lost in the South American hinterlands, Zama discovers that Vicuña is not lurking in the wilderness but that he is hiding in plain sight by pretending to be one of the soldiers commissioned to join the excursion and is trying to find the *cocos*. Towards the end, Vicuña Porto amputates Zama's arms to later spare his life, which an indigenous child ultimately saves.

This film effaces the temporal and spatial referents of the Spanish empire in the Americas to suggest an alternative temporality to colonialism's actual history and to the periodization that situates the Anthropocene until the dawn of the industrial revolution. Nonetheless,

5. I use the terms *americanos* or *criollos*, which lend themselves to confusion due to the plurality of meanings associated with them. I use *criollos* to refer to the children of Spaniards that were born on the American continent. I use *americanos* to refer to the new identities that encompassed different ethnic groups in the Americas that shaped the content after its independence.

6. Among the films that touch on European settlers venturing into the unexplored natural spaces of the Americas, we can mention Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982); Roland Joffé's *The Mission* (1986); and Ciro Guerra's *The Embrace of the Serpent* (2015). Gemünden (2019) argues that Martel defies Herzog's male gaze that celebrates his protagonists as 'tragic heroes' (101) by exposing its protagonist to transformative and humbling experiences (101). Another feature of *Zama* is the distinct relationship of Europeans to nature. In many of these movies, Anglo/European protagonists, whether fighting against the elements for the sake of their own prowess or engaging with them to save them from exploitation, usually encounter natural spaces and humans still outside modern rationality.

7. The rumors regarding Vicuña Porto vacillate between a placeholder of barbarism for colonial administrators to ridiculous accounts of wrongdoings underscore the inconsistency of the movie's chronology. The bandit is the subject of all kinds of hearsay, from raping and looting, to having supposedly died at the hands of Zama, or that he has been killed 'over a thousand times.'

this erasure operates within a reflection about a historical referent of Spanish domination: the *encomienda*. This infamous colonial institution disguised slavery by forcing natives to work for Spaniards in exchange for protection and evangelization. This institution was progressively dismantled during the 16th century, even as it remained in some remote corners of the empire. Beyond the specificity of historical dates, Martel's *Zama* touches on the modernizing effects on the colonial administration of the *Reformas Borbónicas*.

Even as these liberal reforms and their continuation by the nascent Latin American republics did not do away with colonialism but rather reinforced it, *Zama* seems to resist any changes to the hierarchies of colonial power. A scene in which *Zama* serves as the *asesor letrado* makes evident his position regarding any alterations in the hierarchies within the colonial system. In this sequence, a couple of *colonos* claims an *encomienda* since there are no more natives to put to work. Without hesitating, *Zama* gives the *colonos* 50 natives to work and bids farewell to the couple, whose granddaughter, a *mestiza* sitting across the room petting two dogs and who is framed in a medium long shot, appears to judge his decision stoically and avoids any physical or visual contact with the functionary. Although *Zama's* decision leads to a physical altercation with his assistant Ventura Prieto, who confronts him for enslaving his fellow *americanos*, this scene makes evident one of the axes of the film: the growing subterranean tension between imperial power and the racialized subjects and natural life.

As Gonzalo Aguilar and Jens Andermann have argued, New Argentine Cinema, of which Martel is one of its leading directors, marks a departure from the moralizing national allegories produced during the 1980s. These films attempted to reckon with this country's dictatorial past to construct a culture of memory that underpins a newly re-established democracy. Both critics note that neoliberalism and the 2001 crisis influenced film production in this country. If the melodramas that emerged after the democratic transition saw themselves as aiding the foundation of Argentina's national democracy, novel directors thoroughly questioned these certainties at the turn of the century. They often thought of cinema as a tool for inquiring about social practices and common sense produced during neoliberalism.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, Martel's films dissect the country's socio-economic and political pasts in often subtle and original ways. If *The Swamp* (2001), *The Holy Girl* (2004), and *The Headless Woman* (2008) engage with economic decay and racial differences, environmental degradation, patriarchy, and neoliberalism at the turn of the 20th century, *Zama* tenders a profound mode of understanding of colonialism and its relation to the Anthropocene that engages, at once, with the current exclusion of indigenous people in Argentina and reflects on this problem beyond the nation-state. In other words, unlike Martel's previous work, *Zama* abandons a concrete reference to Argentina's contemporary history to engage with many of same topics such as patriarchy and racism albeit in their historical origins.<sup>9</sup> By the same token, Martel does so in an anti-historicist way by creating a fictional world that refers, but ultimately does not attempt, to accurately represent our contemporary world. On the contrary, *Zama* examines distinct logics of domination such as colonialism and anthropocentrism beyond the constraints of historicism.

In this regard, the fictional world of *Zama* not only speculates on how the past could have been different – a world in which the *criollos* accept their destiny as *americanos* – but ultimately how the future could have become a heterogeneous place instead of one completely constrained and homogenized by the forces of modernity. Martel's film poses an ethical question on whether those historically silenced can speak for themselves. As Gerd Gemünden reminds us, subalterns appear not entirely subjected to colonial power. Still, we constantly get “the

8. By engaging with *mise-en-scène*, a neorealist style, performances by non-professional actors instead of the theatrical style of the 80s, accidents, and chance instead of fully parse narratives, New Argentinian Cinema embraced the uncertainty and the complexity of contemporary political topographies instead of presenting a self-contained Argentinian nation.

9. While not directly addressing contemporary politics, the presence of Qom and Guaraní actors and language in *Zama* resonates with current forms of exclusion in this country. In line with Martel's shorts *Nueva Argirópolis* (2010) and *Legua* (2017), which portray the dispossession of land and the exploitation of rivers for agrobusiness and the impacts on indigenous communities, *Zama* makes evident that the continuities between colonial forms of exploitation with contemporary extractivism. For example, the demands of the Qom people with regards to access to territorial disputes, were disregarded and repressed by both the local Peronist allies of progressive government of Cristina Fernández and ignored by the conservative rule of Mauricio Macri.

impression that the servants and slaves know more than the masters they serve" (123).<sup>10</sup> Zama does not speak for the colonized subjects but instead only hints at the possibility that these other languages that do not abide by our technological compulsion and the destruction of nature might emerge within a colonial milieu. Nevertheless, the perspective of engaging with other voices raises the question of how and when these new relations to nature could arrive, and more importantly, whether Zama and those invested in modernity, understood as human domain over natural landscape, could even listen to them.

Interpreting this piece as a film about waiting would point to a reading that problematizes Zama's *espera* – in the sense of hoping and waiting – for the recognition granted by imperial power but also to the emergence of a new subject. As Gemünden points out, the movie's aesthetic compositions, which include autochthonous animals and racialized others in unruly and saturated interior spaces, contribute to the feeling of disorientation experienced by the protagonist and configures a "struggle over the space" (111). The gradual dissolution of the administrator's grip over the space and the silent signs of defiance by the servants are part of a gradual upheaval against colonial rule that dislocates the centrality of the *criollo* and the hierarchies of power (123-134). For Gemünden, we witness the conclusion of a progressive upheaval against colonial rule. The indigenous take control of the final part of the narrative, and Zama learns because of Vicuña Porto "a no esperar nada" (123) (not to expect/hope for anything).

This rejection of *la espera* would point to many of Martel's insights about the dismissal of hoping and waiting as it belongs to a patriarchal and Catholic order. For Martel, men learn from a young age to expect great things, like the glories of European adventurers, while women learn to wait, cope, and adapt to failure and subordination (interviewed by Gemünden and Spitta 143).<sup>11</sup> As Martel comments, the Christian promise of salvation works as a moralizing and repressive force and a blind belief in progress, which could be extended to technological development. The movie's denouement would allow for an ending in which Zama finally listens to the indigenous child in the raft and confronts his destiny as an *americano* rather than as a European-aspiring *criollo* perpetually waiting for recognition from the colonial authorities.<sup>12</sup>

Gemünden's allegorical interpretation hopes for and expects the emergence of a feminine non-white subject. However, even if it is more desirable for our sensibilities, this subject remains within the scope of modernity. A reading of the film that focuses on the missing arrival of a particular subject nevertheless runs the risk of making the various landscapes as well as living and non-living beings that inhabit the film wholly subservient to the narrative of Zama's personal redemption. The film's ultimate meaning would revolve around embracing and fostering native and *mestizo* culture that cancels out a Eurocentric perspective. The presence of living beings that grab our attention or the Paraná River would only be 'raw materials' necessary for giving birth to a national subject and its distinctive local identity within the larger conception of modernity.

Moreover, nature in *Zama* would play an analogous role to that which Martin Lefebvre sees for natural landscapes in commercial narrative cinema as being constrained to plot developments. For Lefebvre, landscapes in film have served as a subservient aesthetic element that helps develop narratives and characters.<sup>13</sup> As such, nature and the

10. In a comment that Luciana (Lola Dueñas) directs to Zama as she tries to secure permission for her mute and soon-to-be freed slave Malemba (Mariana Nunes) to marry, she asks, "Can a mute give her consent?" Luciana's question is a rhetorical one, since the various gazes and ironic responses of indigenous and African characters remind us that despite their subaltern position, servants are hiding their true intentions and thoughts. Luciana would later make evident in a comment referring to her maid's wit and ability to communicate beyond language impairment: "she is not mute, she has her tongue." A comment that can be understood as Malemba's and the slaves' language ability to transcend their colonial erasure.

11. Martel's cinema is notorious for its feminist perspective. As Ana Forcinito explains, the *Salta* trilogy, which only features female protagonists, is a cinematic inquiry on patriarchal and colonial aspects of Argentinian society. According to Forcinito, Martel's cinema shows how women are produced by the dominant male gaze and different discourses (colonial, religious, medical power.) Martel's emphasis is not so much on the total dominance of the patriarchy or the projection of an alternate women's subjectivity but on the erasure and the traces of female discourse and how women mimic and subvert the patriarchal voice.

12. It is possible that Martel's Zama survives and confronts his destiny as an *americano*. Another interpretation of the final scene is that it is only at this point that Zama contemplates his own mortality, that it is his finitude as another mortal being-towards-death, regardless of his ethnic identity or place within the colonial administration.

13. Lefebvre borrows from Freiburg's *The Art of Photoplay Making* a taxonomy that explains the degree to which film settings are subordinated to the narrative demands of film plots: neutral, informative, sympathetic, participating, and formative (64). This classification explains the degree to which landscapes are subsumed by character and plot development. A neutral setting is indifferent to the characters; the informative and sympathetic ones provide some sort of information or mood regarding the film, while the participating and formative play an active role in the plot or at shaping the interior dimension of characters.

subalterns in *Zama* would serve for the protagonist's personal development or the film's moral lesson that departs from Eurocentrism only to become a Latin American nationalist allegory. This aesthetic use of natural elements would also be part of the larger narrative of the modern subject that renders nature graspable as landscape. Such a transformation into an aesthetic product not only reduces the complexity of nature into a legible space but is part of a larger process of disciplining and homogenization that readies the eventual consumption and destruction of nature by a subject that subtracts himself from the world he inhabits.

Along with the plot of Zama's attempts to move through an administrative maze, it is possible to see the story of the protagonist as that of a subject that does not see himself as inhabiting the world where he lives in. Zama sees himself as a total stranger; even as an observer of life at the empire's margins. Zama's look, filmed in a long shot that places him against the backdrop of the natural landscape and natives, conveys that he is bored and expectant as when he peers upon the river and other natural landscapes. However, Zama's gaze is hardly neutral but instead one of domination. This is exemplified in the scene at a party where he is offered newly arrived *mulatillas* for his enjoyment; Zama refuses the offer because he prefers white women. In turn, we realize Zama is not only an outsider to the American space he inhabits; as a representative and bearer of imperial power, he is bestowed with the right to appropriate or dispose of every resource, human or natural, that he encounters.

*Zama's* first scene contains various shots in which the protagonist's gaze fixates on the waters of the Paraná and on the fish that are expelled to the river's banks as they swim about. Relying on Lefebvre's perspective of narrative and landscapes, such images would analogize and reflect the narrative of Zama's personal and professional life as being trapped by the waters of the river. Yet, Lefebvre moves beyond Freiburg's ideas about landscape being subservient to narrative by claiming that landscapes in cinema are at times 'indifferent' to plot or character development owing to spectatorship. Film spectators have the ability to arrest the landscape from the narrative flow in order to consider its broader relationship to the film. If we are to extract the landscape and natural elements in *Zama* beyond the protagonist's personal development, this film enables a meditation on colonialism, modernity, and the Anthropocene.

While landscapes help construct *Zama's* narrative as a critique of colonial history, certain moments in which the landscape is indifferent to the narrative point to something related to, although simultaneously independent from, the problems of the national allegory. Even if landscapes have never been tantamount to nature but only a way to render it legible—whether this is through painting, film, or photography—the current strain on the environment produced by human activities reframes the question of the subordinate place that modernity has assigned to nature. In this regard, the notion of the Anthropocene signals towards the limit of a clear distinction between human existence and a natural autonomous world.

As Jennifer Fay has argued, cinema maintains a privileged relationship to the Anthropocene as an industrial artistic medium as well as for its relation to landscapes. Fay argues that cinema embodies the paradoxical relationship of humans to the natural world. In the case of studio-produced cinema, the human tendency to control the natural world becomes readily evident in crafting an artificial human-made environments. Yet by mid-century, when moviemakers became more interested in filming on location, the distinction between a human or a natural-constructed world collapsed. Though Fay focuses primarily on US films, the following claim seems to hold true in *Zama*: "Even leaving the studio confines, there are simply no locations on Earth that are not

in some way already a product of or contaminated by human design” (8). In *Zama* we see a progression from interior spaces towards exterior locations. The former establishes a sense of normalcy and dominion that contrasts with the distortion and loss of control over nature shown as the narrative shifts to increasingly vaster exterior spaces. Such a spatial dynamic is underscored when Zama has his personal belongings and furniture thrown onto a patio by the governor. Fay’s notion of “vernacular Anthropocene” (203), which she borrows from Miriam Hansen’s idea of vernacular modernism, is also instrumental for analyzing *Zama*. Fay contends that, much like classical cinema was incorporated and adapted to local contexts, the global dimension of the Anthropocene must be grounded in local scenarios.

A “vernacular Anthropocene” opens a space for reflecting on landscape and nature from the fictive margins of the Spanish American periphery about the Anthropocene’s temporal and spatial coordinates. Despite its origin in the hard sciences, we must question the assumptions of the concept of the Anthropocene. While its prefix “Anthropos” refers to the human element disrupting natural systems, we must not lose sight that the prefix offers a totalizing and homogeneous understanding of our species. Such a universalizing dimension ignores that modern social structures, like colonialism and capitalist economy, have triggered most of the transformations on Earth.

To add another layer of complexity to a global process that deeply alters local contexts, Yusoff argues that the concept of the Anthropocene subsumes the plurality of human experiences into one subject, namely, the modern Western man. Contrary to the narrative that it was not until the last century in which effects of human activity came to irreversibly define and affect Earth, Yusoff argues that since the European occupation of the Americas, this process was already underway. Not only did colonization initiated an unprecedented traffic of animal and plant species and forced migrations, but most fundamentally, the destruction of other forms of relating to nature became globally imposed during the process of colonization.

From a European perspective, Carl Schmitt’s *Nomos of the Earth* narrates modernity’s birth as a political construction dependent on colonial expansion. Schmitt argues that against the threat of total war in Europe, the world was divided between this continent and colonial space. In Europe warfare was lawfully regulated whereas in the colonial space the rules of just warfare were legally ignored to allow for the colonial appropriation of land. This spatialization of the world rationalized violence and contained it from tearing apart European society at the expense of people at the margins (we can think of *Zama* granting rights of *encomienda* to the *colonos*). On the contrary, beginning with the 19th century, the era whose emergence *Zama* is witnessing, liberalism and the equality of all men to become independent economic agents and modern citizens became the driving force of the homogenization of the globe.

Within this broader historical and geographical framework, *Zama* operates as a commentary on the underpinnings of racial stratification in Latin America and the colonial origins of the Anthropocene. However, even if it is right to expose the colonial and capitalist orientation of the concept, we should be wary of being complacent with only correcting or making precise the history of the Anthropocene. In what follows, I will point out how the Anthropocene, as a concept centered and limited by the notion of the human, ultimately relates to something not entirely human nor natural (understood as an abstract concept that is the other of humankind or culture), but to technology as a limit between these two realms. Departing from Heidegger’s “Question Concerning Technology”, I do not refer to technology as the incremental developments in our capacity to manipulate things in the world nor to advancements in scientific knowledge, but rather as a

particular relationship of humanity towards beings and nature. Heidegger's critique of technology is directed towards a historically specific way of approaching the world that orders and renders being, that is, everything that appears on Earth, from inanimate objects to the human itself, always "at hand," available, for circulation and consumption. For Heidegger, technology is grounded in our capacity for "revealing" and "un-concealing" how we come to understand our world and the beings that inhabit it. Even if modern technology and science present themselves as transhistorical truths, whose axioms are verifiable for all times and places, for Heidegger, they are not the only way of revealing being, but only one mode among many possible modes determined by its own historicity (i.e., the Greeks for him, but we could also add the indigenous).

Modern technology is driven by the will to make everything appear only as being, that is, as an objectifiable totality that is fully quantifiable and measurable for a subject, man, that can fully order being according to logical criteria. In this regard, we can think of Zama's disinterest in the specific differences between natives, slaves, or natural life. As a colonial administrator, these different things and persons are, for the protagonist, interchangeable pieces in the colonial machinery that he attempts to game. Heidegger's reflections paint a dire landscape that is particularly germane to our concerns about current ecological devastation. Modern technology as a way of revealing puts a demand, "a challenge", by which everything is secured (*gestellt* often translated as "enframed"), always ready and disposed, to be extracted, much like the minerals that lie in the subsoil. As Heidegger writes, "The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit" (14). While Heidegger's claims are broader than ecological concerns, the critique of coloniality, and even technics themselves, it is possible to see the Anthropocene as the ecological manifestation of the conclusion of modern metaphysics. If this is the ending of the metaphysical era, then humans cannot keep encountering the world as an infinite stockpile of beings that are fully objectifiable, thus ready for their extraction, circulation, and consumption.

The crux of Heidegger's reflections on technology is that while he disdains a world impoverished by its hubris, the technological encompassing of the world allows for unmasking the metaphysical illusions that posit the human as the ultimate ground by which beings must be ordered and dominated. In turn, the delusion that the human is the ultimate master of technology and nature breaks down as we become one amongst many fungible resources. In the case of Martel's film, Zama becomes yet another cog within a machinery that simply ignores him. Heidegger realizes that, much like our ecological concerns, the breaking of the mirage that supposes infinite dominion of nature comes with a great risk that, in turn, opens the possibility for something new to arise.

### **Sediments of Modernity**

Although departing from different perspectives, both Yusoff and Heidegger question the developmentalist history of natural sciences by showing that the profound alterations to the planet began much earlier than the current geological accounts. For Yusoff, colonialism already foregrounds an extractive relation in which enslaved populations are dehumanized and turned into objects that, like modern fuels and minerals, are constructed as costless sources of energy that are extracted by a nascent capitalist economy. In this regard, I will now show how *Zama* traces this mode of revealing beyond its historiographic limits, yet this extractive imaginary also illuminates paths for thinking humanity otherwise during the Anthropocene. While Gemünden is right to point out that there is a progression in *Zama* by which the veneer of civilization gradually is eroded and that culminates in the film's last part in which natural landscapes and the indigenous



become central, it is also true that there are many fissures within the film that allow for a different understanding of this erosion.

Gemünden's interpretation of *Zama* coincides with a distinction within the film regarding the construction of spaces. As mentioned above, most of the interior spaces that appear during the first part of the movie are depicted as an imitation of European courtly society, even if the temporal and spatial distance between this forgotten colonial outpost and the centers of power makes any attempt to recreate this continent ludicrous. Conversely, those exterior spaces in which nature abounds and natives are not under the yoke of colonial extraction appear to resist the imperial power that attempts their domination. Foreshadowing Zama's encounter with nature towards the end of the movie, the supposedly controlled interior spaces start to become disturbed not only by the settlers' own incompetence but also by natural forces. As the story progresses, it becomes evident that the illusion of civilization recedes and the Europeanness fades away. As Luciana's teeth appear blackened, the governors and their aides increasingly behave as demagogues concerned with drinking, finding *cocos*, and playing cards. Concomitantly, supposedly civilized interior spaces appear more distorted, and nature gradually penetrates and degrades the last remainders of civilization. The llama that looks directly at the camera during Zama's conversation with the governor, as well as the vermin that destroy the walls of the protagonist's room, is a reminder of the fictitious dominance of civilization over nature.

While the narrative poses civilization against nature and reflects prevailing historical and cultural accounts of colonialism and histories of the Anthropocene, different instances of the film complicate this opposition. As Fay argues, following environmentalist Bill McKibben, the recognition of Earth as a hospitable place, a *Heimat* or home, for human development has been upended by our impact on the environment. Fay argues that our misrecognition of Earth as our home ceases and instead becomes a space that is profoundly disorienting. For these reasons, Fay proposes that the neologism *Eaarth* reflects such a transformation. *Eaarth* better captures the uncanniness or *Unheimlichkeit* of a nature that has been thoroughly subdued yet falls increasingly out of our control. Zama not only shows the uncanniness of *Eaarth* as produced by the colonial Anthropocene but that the total domination over nature eventually turns against civilization.

An instructive example of the uncanniness surrounding civilization manifests itself in the film's soundtrack. The smooth ambient noises and the repetitive sounds, such as those made by the slaves while operating a mechanical fan and musical instruments, shape a tragic narrative: Zama's entrapment in the Spanish garrison and his descent from a position of power to becoming captive. As Eleonora Rapan points out, *Zama* is the first of Martel's films that uses the Shepard effect. This effect consists of the overlapping sine waves separated by octaves. When played in ascending or descending scale, the Shepard effect tricks the listener into perceiving the tones as perpetually rising or falling.

Building from Michel Chion's work, Rapan argues that sound is a way to temporalize or vectorize "any landscape or still image" (140). One way to propel a static image into a dynamic is by including diegetic sounds, such as chipping birds in a landscape or an ambulance in an urban setting. Rapan's description of the temporalization of landscape could be interpreted as the other side of the arresting of cinematographic landscape as described by Lefebvre. In as much as cinema is a medium composed predominantly of moving images and sounds, by bringing together these two critics, it is evident that the mobilization of landscapes is achieved in film by an intertwinement of sound and image.

In *Zama*, the Shepard effect appears when the protagonist is having conversations that remind him of his shortcomings. For example, when the protagonist discusses his much-desired transfer to Lerma or his purportedly heroic actions. In these scenes shot in medium close-up, the effect gives the illusion of descent until the speech of Zama's interlocutors breaks down, and dialogues and images no longer coincide. By presenting us with a sound that produces the impression of eternity in a brief span of time, the film reinforces the feelings of entrapment. This motif points to settings that reflect both their remoteness from centers of power as well as Zama's failure as a patriarchal figure. Rapan argues against the idea that the Shepard tone simply metaphorizes the main character's "descent" (138).

By pointing out that the Shepard effect is part of the film's "disturbances by non-diegetic intruders" (139), the effect and tilted shots of *Zama* come as a projection on the protagonist's conscience. This leads Rapan to argue that Martel is not simply temporalizing her film but meditating about time. Although Rapan does not develop how *Zama* thinks time anew, many of the elements she offers about the use of Shepard tones allow us to reflect on the relationship between (historical and anthropocenic) time and cinematic landscapes. While Rapan correctly points out that Shepard tones coincide with shots of Zama's troubled conscience and loss of control, an excessive focus on human conscience vis-à-vis nature would situate this film as another iteration of modern philosophical idealism (likes of many representations of the Anthropocene already do.) Rapan's distinction between the sounds that vectorize moving images between intradiegetic (landscape and animals sounds) and extradiegetic sounds (music by *Los Indios Tabajaras* and the Shepard effect,) although more critical than just an allegory of Zama's downfall, still reproduces a distinction between natural and historical time, thus between nature and civilization. Without truly problematizing the use of the Shepard tone, Rapan briefly meditates on the presence of "electronically manipulated" (39) sound of cicadas hornets and flies, ambient sound, and domestic objects like glass and cutlery. The purported distinction between civilization and nature, between man-made and natural elements that traverse the film, is blurred, thus raising the question of the validity of such distinction.

Breaking this opposition between nature and civilization opens another interpretative possibility for this film: the protagonist has, like the racialized subjects before him, entered a process that transforms him into an object. Though the indigenous and African characters always seem to know more than what they express, it remains an enigma to what extent they know that they are being produced as objects. In a scene that exploits the ambiguity of subaltern knowledge and the colonial and modern incapacity to listen and completely rule their subjects the protagonist enters, while looking for the town's doctor, into what seems to be a religious rite that is taking place in an enclosed space (Figure 1).

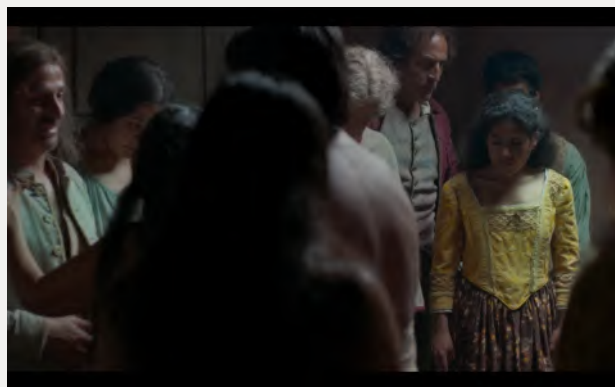


Fig.1 Zama witnesses a ritual

The combination of silence and rattling sounds that alternate between the doctor fainting onto the ground and a mute child (perhaps Zama's own child) are part of the construction of a colonial space that is never in complete control, as well as a foresight of Zama's flight into the wilderness.

The sequence that follows the opening credits encapsulates the protagonist's complex relationship towards the landscape: Zama contemplates the scenery while standing on the riverbanks as a group of native children, at which he only quickly glances, playfully walk away. This scene foretells the narrative of constant and pointless waiting for news from the river while overlooking the native population. Yet, the length of the shot and the lack of dialogue and minimal ambient sound allow the spectator to engage with what Lefebvre sees as a landscape indifferent to narrative. Along with the characters, the spectator's eyes may wander around the strips of vegetation that appear in the background, the mirroring of the sky and the river, and the different crags facing the river. The path of the water gently transits into wet and then dry sand and eventually into the rock formations that frame the scene, which in turn contrast with reddish boulders lying on the shore.

Such a portrayal of the landscape allows for a larger association between history and geology. Like human archives, sediments contain recordings of different geological periods that will most likely reflect our presence on earth long after the human species disappear. Recalling Heidegger's critique of the humanity turning also into a "resource," the film presents images of indigenous children at the banks of the river and the crags surrounding it as closer to the landscape than to an observant Zama (Figure 2) as well as the images of the women covering their bodies with mud (Figure 3). Following Yusoff's analysis, the film's association of mineral extraction with racialized and feminine subjects shows that humanity's subsumption by modern technological forces first took place with colonial extractivism.<sup>14</sup>



Fig.2 Zama on the banks of the river



Fig.3 Women bath at the shore

14. Although Heidegger is not interested in writing a historiography of technology but rather in its first principles, Yusoff's and Martel's points complement his arguments: the preeminence of colonialism for turning entire swaths of humans into resources. The centrality of colonialism allows for a reading of Heidegger that displaces it from its European vantage point to shed light on the internal relationships between technology, extractivism, and colonial practices.

As Zama continues to wander around the river, he is seen exploring the crags following what appears to be female laughter. This sound leads him to lurk over a group of naked women, including Malemba and Luciana, taking a mud bath while translating words from Guaraní into Spanish. After being yelled at by the women “¡Mirón!” Zama leaves the scene followed by Malemba, sent by her owner to see who the voyeur was, only to be slapped by Luciana once she catches up to him. While it is a sequence that points to the gender dynamics in the film, particularly Zama’s failed masculine gaze and the solidarity among women, what remains striking is how the hues of the minerals impinge upon the skin of the women. This scene suggests a desire for a natural element, mud, to function as an erasure of culturally produced differences, such as skin tonalities, which structured colonial society. Alternatively, this scene not only reminds us that even if Zama remains a failed patriarch, women and racialized bodies become a kind of a standing reserve (Heidegger, 2013) for his consumption.

### Technological Landscapes

In aesthetical terms, the cinematic use of natural imagery in *Zama* is part of a larger critique of the landscape as an art form that has historically partaken in the exploitation of nature. Landscape is not nature per se but a form of representation of nature and, in turn, a form of control. As Andermann explains about the history of landscape in Latin America, this art form is an “artifice complicit with a violence that has not ceased to tear off flesh from the earth” (*Tierras en trance* 16).<sup>15</sup> A bodily metaphor for the exploitation of Earth that is also a gendered trope comes with “rape, of which every landscape is a sublimated image” (16).<sup>16</sup> As the Heideggerian terminology reminds us, the technological mode of revealing has at its center the rendering of being into a measurable entity at the mercy of a knowing subject. By the same token, Andermann argues that every landscape deploys simultaneously a “sensorial and affective apprehension (*aprehensión*) of earth” (10). Much like Lefebvre argues that natural settings are subsumed to narrative demands, landscape’s “aprehensión/apprehension” of beings is performed by the aesthetic representation of every “natural object” that inscribes them as images always ready to be read and interpreted. As Andermann explains with regards to painting:

Painting aspires to become a neutral and invisible window towards artificial time-space in which it projects its “matter,” for doing so it must erase every mark and trace of the painting’s work of production, of the physical encounter between body, light, medium, and color” (20).<sup>17</sup>

This aesthetic appropriation ultimately lies in fiction, the pretense of the artist and the observer as being outside representation, not only in the sense of observing a piece of art but more radically as being that who “orders” the world rather than part of those being “ordered.”

As Heidegger already signaled, the purported exteriority of the subject expressed in Andermann’s account of artistic representation –much like Zama gazing at the women, is historically situated but not exclusive to a European male – that renders all other beings legible has run its course. The idea of nature as a readable image, for example, is exhausted. As such, the limit of humanist discourse is that it ultimately does not question its own representation of humanity’s mastery for ordering every being, but only strives for a more equalitarian distribution of the dominion over nature. Gemünden’s reading of *Zama* as an ethnic revolt against European domination as the fulfillment of modernity’s ethical promise of equality exemplifies this idea. *Zama*’s critique not only makes evident how colonial exploitation was grounded in aesthetic procedures such as the landscape, which represents and makes legible beings. This film is part of a larger reflection on how the Anthropocene’s blurring of the historically constructed distinction between man-made and natural

15. Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

16. Landscapes are the performative repetition of appropriation over the land historically represented as feminine. As Schmitt’s gendered understanding of territorial expansion reminds us, “In mythical language, the earth became known as the mother of law [...] First, the fertile earth contains within herself, within the womb of her fecundity, an inner measure, because human toil and trouble, human planting and cultivation of the fruitful earth is rewarded justly by her with growth and harvest.” (42).

17. Andermann argues that landscapes hold a memory of nature destroyed by capitalist primitive accumulation. This repressed memory of a lost relationship to nature is the raw material for a utopian practice that takes the form of the landscape to its limit. Andermann reflects on the possibility of a different relationship towards a natural representation that combines the critique of landscape with one that enables the landscape to overcome natural exploitation.

worlds has thrown the regime of natural representation into a terminal crisis. Zama also confronts the role of aesthetics and colonial exploitation. After the opening scene, the coloration of many of the characters' bodies becomes more common. Before examining this logic in *Zama*, it is worth reflecting on what color entails in cinematic theory and aesthetics. Although color is subjective and, above all, a contextual element—blue is, for instance, a staple of *Modernismo* and depression—there are different ways in which art has conceptualized color. Paul Coates and David Batchelor have pointed out how Western aesthetics has constructed color —as opposed to the absence of it—beyond its specific cultural or stylistic contexts. As such, the Western imaginary shaped a dichotomy between color and colorlessness. This distinction places color, particularly its excess, as sensuous, bodily, artificial, and intoxicating compared to the universal (and body-less) realms of form and meaning associated with the lack of color and eventually with whiteness. Whiteness mirrors the racial subtexts of colonialism's "white" intellectual and artistic gaze over colored bodies of exploitation. Because of its condition as accessory and accidental and not essential to art and aesthetics, Coates (2010) associates color with a supplement (in line with the idea of a "drug") that enhances, yet always brings indeterminacy to artistic production. As such, even if certain critical currents in aesthetics have attempted to disregard color, its presence always upsets the stability of meaning; thus, it must be something that must be dominated by art rather than letting it run indeterminately free.

Returning to the distinction between interior and exterior spaces, while the hinterlands in which Vicuña Porto supposedly roams are depicted through high contrast and intense tonalities of green, interior spaces tend towards more discreet shades of ochre and dark tones. Likewise, while the clothes of the Spaniards and criollos are shown in neutral tones and fewer bright clothes, African and indigenous characters are more often shot by contrasting their skin tones against the highly intense blues of certain walls and garments. Elsewhere, slaves who work as messengers wear blue European-style jackets with grey-haired wigs, but no pants seem to mock the alleged seriousness of bureaucratic practices (Figure 4). Similarly, indigenous women (and even Luciana at times and her ambiguous solidarity with these characters) also appear related to blue tonalities as they are dyeing textiles, thus effectively partaking in the nascent chains of production (Figure 5).



Fig.2 Zama on the banks of the river

Fig.4 Zama and a slave

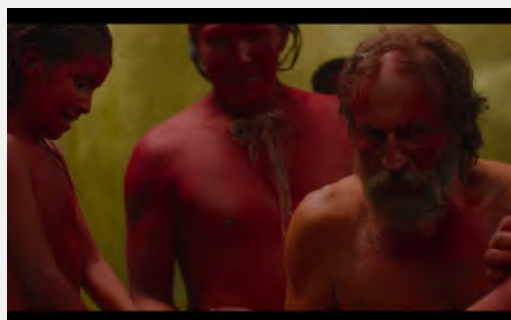


Fig.5 Women dye pieces of cloth.

However, much like the image in which the women are covered with mud at the beginning of the film, this artificial coloring spreads onto their bodies. It is not only that women and slaves participate as virtually costless and exploited labor producing commodities, extracting resources, or providing sustenance for the settlers, but that this process has already transformed these populations into human resources. While such a term usually refers to corporate and intellectual labor, following Heidegger's lead, we can say that the racialized others attain a category of human resources by occupying a paradoxical place as vehicles for the exploitation of nature and as raw materials themselves. The rise of human resources jettisons the idea of a subject that has mastery over the world and instead shows that once technology as a mode of revealing comes to full force, even the human becomes objectifiable and fungible. In turn, like the rest of beings, humans must always be ready for circulation and consumption. Similarly, the portrayal of the indigenous and African subjects associated with the artificiality of color (what is more openly deceitful than pigments for hiding the true looks of something?) marks a radical break with the idea that these populations offer a return to originary forms of production – that is, before capitalism and modern technique. This is not to say that we must conform to modern technics as the only possible way for relating to nature. If anything, the Anthropocene's heinous consequences are a reminder of its unfeasibility. Nevertheless, any relationship with nature that is worth rethinking must thoroughly question the purported mastery of humans over other beings and the dichotomy of culture regarding nature.

#### Coloring the Anthropocene

The opposition between color associated with racialized and feminized bodies and nature vis-à-vis the modern subject that embodies whiteness, patriarchy, and mastery over beings, reaches its limit towards the end of the film. The flight into the wilderness presents a new space where a high-contrast and intense tone of green prevails. As Coates has pointed out by citing the examples such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), the dichotomies mentioned above have been used in the film to represent colorful cinematic worlds as representing intoxicating and dream-like scenarios. *Zama* could be read as partaking of this imagery. As the explorers stray further away from civilization, situations become increasingly oneiric: the group runs into warriors with bird-like costumes, and, in the scene where Zama discovers the identity of Vicuña Porto, the explorers must pretend they are asleep as a group of blind elders traverses their camp. The first impression of this natural space is that these dream-like scenarios and their natural and human diversity escape from the modern homogenization of resources and the colonial grip. By the same token, we could think that, unlike Zama, Vicuña Porto truly symbolizes the future of *americanos* with his Portuguese-inflected Spanish and his willingness to communicate with the locals. Yet, akin to how Zama granted rights of *encomienda*, the indigenous' and Vicuña's rogue sovereignty disposes of other men and lust for the *cocos* make us realize that the hinterlands are not a space of resistance but only the other side of colonial exploitation.

In another enigmatic sequence, the travelers are taken prisoners by a group of indigenous people who have painted their bodies red (Figure 6).



Fig.6 Zama held captive

Their captivity resembles the scene I referred to previously in which Zama runs into a native ceremony spoken in Guaraní. Like the previous ritual episode, without any knowledge of the Qom language, this scene throws Zama and the audience into a moment of radical uncommunication. Shot in closed quarters, this sequence is notorious for its increasing rhythm constructed by the repetition of sounds and visuals featuring the natives beating their captives and dialogues in Qom. The velocity increases as the shots of bodes painted with red ink that mixes with the blood spilling out of their wounds alternate with the screeching noises from the constant opening and closing metallic door of the room in which the captives are thrown into (we briefly glimpse a knocked-down explorer lying in the floor).

Afterward, the captives are rounded up by the tribe's members and interpellated by one of their leaders. Through the intervention of Vicuña, who is serving as a translator, the travelers realize that it is their names that the community leaders are asking. After the initial introduction, the explorers are shoved into what seems to be the door the spectators had heard and seen in the previous moments. The scene comes to a halt as we see the explorers back again in the wild, still with residues of the red paint. This passage, which resembles a violent baptism or ritual of initiation, resists interpretation and insertion in the movie's larger narrative arc. However, this fragment takes on another significance as the movie closes with Vicuña asking Zama to tell him where he can find the *cocos* filled with precious stones. The protagonist responds that those stones are 'worthless,' which triggers the bandits' wrath, who then amputate Zama's arms. In this broader context of the search for the *cocos*, it is possible to see the ritual as something other than an example of misunderstanding between cultures or a feverish dream. By pondering the critique of the landscape as part of a more extensive process of marking colonial subjects as resources, this scene takes on a different meaning. This fragment echoes an industrial workshop –with its metallic noises and the natives working– that are “producing” Zama and explorers as no longer representatives of the Spanish crown but just as another human resource available for consumption.

Inverting the idea that Zama learns to accept his destiny as an *americano* rather than a European, he, like the racialized subjects he commanded over in the colonial outpost, has now been marked with artificial colorants. The blurring of these hierarchies also troubles spatializations such as Schmitt's divide between the center and the periphery and whose de-colonial inversion would argue that there is a clear distinction between spaces penetrated by capitalism and those that are not. *Zama* shows, much like Heidegger, that the core and advancement of technology is not the product of the incremental increase of science or technics. On the contrary, even as the Anthropocene has become a central term for understanding our planet's current transformations, its core lies beyond geological processes but in the relentless global homogenization of beings as fully measurable and disposable.

Even before it became evident that human activities had not left space on Earth untouched –much like the natives, bandits, and colonial administrators of *Zama*–, the key relation underpinning the Anthropocene is how modernity has shaped and constituted a global extractivist system. This system moves beyond distinctions such as center and periphery by incorporating these boundaries; everything works, knowingly or not, for turning beings into objects always ready and available for exploitation. Against a reading of this movie as a narrative in which Zama realizes that he must confront his destiny as an *americano*, this film makes evident to the audience that the protagonist, like his colonial subjects before, has been entirely subsumed into a total process of accumulation. Perhaps more radically, Zama is already part of a process by which humans are becoming yet

another sediment that records the human presence on Earth's surface. In the face of the Anthropocene's complete uprooting of modernity's illusory distinction between human and nature, if a new way of understanding is to emerge, it must not be concerned with solely giving voice to the subaltern others, but it must fully confront the concept of the human as a master of being and all the perils that such purported mastery entails.

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