

The Aesthetics of Water Reclamation: Cinema and the Irrigated West

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## Introduction

Since the earliest years of cinema, desert landscapes have been vibrant spaces of filmmaking. So much so that in 1930, the United States Bureau of Reclamation published an article inviting filmmakers to visit the federally-owned Yuma Desert and experience filming on public lands that were, as the bureau claimed, “peculiarly adapted to talkies.”<sup>1</sup> Featured in the Bureau of Reclamation’s official magazine, *Reclamation Era*, the article positions the Yuma Desert as an ideal place to shoot a film because of its remote location, little noise pollution, consistently good weather, and exposure to the sun’s naturally bright lighting—pristine filmmaking conditions miraculously produced by nature and curated by the Bureau of Reclamation for Hollywood’s benefit. The bureau was originally founded in 1902 for the purpose of bringing water to America’s so-called western wasteland. However, as this *Reclamation Era* article indicates, filmmaking and water reclamation are coeval processes inextricably tied to landscapes. In the twentieth century, filmmaking functions as a continuation of the Bureau of Reclamation’s settler colonialist practices of irrigating the American West through infrastructure creation. As the Bureau sought to become the sole provider of water infrastructures in the United States, it simultaneously worked to reclaim cultural infrastructures by producing its own libraries of cinema.

The Yuma Desert is a part of the publicly managed Sonoran Desert located along the U.S.-Mexico border and is mostly devoid of vegetation and animal life, but full of vast sand dunes and sweeping plains.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the desert is classified as an endorheic basin, meaning it has no outflow to external bodies of water, making it an especially dry landscape compared to other kinds of deserts.<sup>3</sup> Yuma Desert has long been irrigated and inhabited by the Quechan Tribe, who farmed on the banks of the Colorado River during dry seasons and lived underground

during periods of flooding for thousands of years. Once the United States annexed Mexico in 1848, white settlers violently forced Quechan Tribe members onto the Fort Yuma Reservation, and gained full ownership of the Yuma Desert in 1898.<sup>4</sup>

Just as the prospect of conquering the West's seemingly unlimited lands fueled the widespread fulfillment of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century, the new possibility of controlling the West's water and energy—via irrigation and dam-building—was taken up by the Bureau of Reclamation in the twentieth. In 1904, Yuma Desert was acquired by the Bureau of Reclamation when they bought out three private irrigation companies attempting to bring water to Yuma.<sup>5</sup> At that time, the Bureau began implementing the Yuma Project, an irrigation plan which sought to divert water to the Yuma Desert and make the seemingly wasted land useful in the eyes of the government—a reclaimed landscape.

To properly irrigate the desert, the Bureau of Reclamation first acquired an initial irrigation system and pumping plant from the private companies that had been attempting to irrigate the Yuma Desert before 1904.<sup>6</sup> The bureau began construction on the Laguna Diversion Dam, which was rapidly completed by 1909: the first of what would eventually become fifteen dams along the Colorado River.<sup>7</sup> From this point, the bureau began building out a system of reclamation infrastructures on the Colorado River to further facilitate the irrigation of the arid Yuma Desert. According to this history of escalating levels of water reclamation, desert lands could only be recognized as useful once they became vibrant sites of agricultural production, made almost unrecognizable from their original conditions.

Like the 1930 article suggests, this irrigated desert could be made even more efficient by making Yuma Desert culturally productive through filming “talkies” in Yuma's empty lands of sunshine and solitude, inherent features of the desert almost designed for the growing film

industry. The article boasts that the Yuma Project was “gaining reputation as sound-picture location,” reporting that Fox Film Corporation was in the process of making a film entitled *The Big Trail*, the first film in which John Wayne played a leading role.<sup>8</sup> For *The Big Trail*, a film centered on the lives of pioneers traversing the Oregon Trail, the film’s producers created elaborate sets of early western towns and used prairie schooners pulled by oxen in an attempt to replicate the Oregon Trail travelers as authentically as possible (Figure 1.1).



Figure 1.1 Photos published in *Reclamation Era* of the recreated Oregon Trail scenes

The *Reclamation Era* article, written by a Yuma Project “instrumentman” named C.B. Clegg, details some of the logistics of filmmaking in the desert. For example, Clegg includes information on the price one could rent oxen (\$20 a day), the process of constructing a mess hall for the film’s employees, the type of costumes worn by actors, how irrigation sprinkler systems could produce realistic rainstorms, and how water pumped out of publicly-owned canals created the film’s dramatic fording scene. Clegg also states that of the \$230,000 Fox spent while filming at Yuma, “a good share...was expended locally for labor, material, rents, and food, as well as other miscellaneous items.” This signals that just as the Bureau of Reclamation’s central interest in filmmaking was economic, the workers, families, and businesses that moved to Yuma for

reclamation purposes were also adjusting themselves towards working in the industry of culture creation and building full communities around the enterprise of irrigated cinema. Furthermore, in using reclaimed water and its accompanying technologies to create the film's simulated environments, the artificiality and performativity of reclamation become exposed in the bureau's ability to seamlessly redirect water intended to edify the desert and transform it into a prop of the cinematic landscape.

By documenting the creation of the synthetic, temporary environments of *The Big Trail* through unnaturally sourced water, the *Reclamation Era* identifies a blurred boundary between water management and culture creation by tying infrastructural irrigation projects with the processes of cinema. From the perspective of the *Reclamation Era*'s writers and readers, then, the desert appeared destined to adapt and evolve itself towards developments in film technologies, providing the bureau with further evidence of the reclaimed desert redeemed by irrigated water.

The Bureau of Reclamation asserts itself in the aforementioned article as both an on-location film commentator and master irrigator of the American West in what would only be the beginning of the Bureau of Reclamation's ongoing relationship with cinematic productions. In this moment, desert lands become dually reclaimed not only by the bureau's colonial impulses of capitalist water control, but additionally by the bureau's many attempts to assert itself as a bureau of cinematic production. Therefore, the process of reclaiming the American West through the Bureau of Reclamation's irrigation and dam-building projects becomes an aesthetic and narratological reclamation of desert landscapes through the practice of filmmaking. The infrastructures put in place to redirect water for capitalistic ends become infrastructures of fiction and simulated natures, which perpetuate narratives of settler colonialism, white exceptionalism,

and environmental subjugation on film. Furthermore, the Bureau of Reclamation's redesigned and redeemed desert becomes a fiction itself as the naturally dry landscape becomes artificially flooded with water: a mythical, fertile, and cinema-worthy desert. In the burgeoning arid communities of the American West, the promise of an aqueous desert becomes the promise of a good and prosperous suburban life, a dream made tangible through its dramatic portrayal on-screen.

The Bureau of Reclamation utilized water infrastructures to create a cultural infrastructure of the irrigated American West most centrally through the creation of its own federally-produced films. Years after *The Big Trail* was released, the Bureau produced two short films entitled *Hydro* (1939) and *The Columbia* (1949), which draw on a history of silent and sound cinemas navigating the narrative possibilities of reclamation infrastructures. As the bureau's films denote, in the twentieth century, the act of filmmaking becomes an aesthetic extension of water reclamation practices. To pursue the implications of the entwined processes of cinema and reclamation, I first turn to the Bureau of Reclamation's histories of photography, print culture, and finally, moving film, before delving into the dramatic narratives of the bureau's own cinematic projects and their influences.

### **Photographing the Sublime Reclaimed Landscape**

In the United States, there are currently 91,457 active dams which impound 600,000 miles of American waterways.<sup>9</sup> Out of this total, 15,621 dams are classified with a high-hazard potential, meaning that a breakage would likely result in the loss of human life and should be considered a significant threat to public safety.<sup>10</sup> Besides anthropocentric effects, dams have long affected their surrounding environments for the worse. Notably, the migrations of fish are simply



halted by the creation of dams because fish, particularly varieties of salmon, rely on free-flowing rivers to reach their seasonal mating locations. Though engineers have attempted to create fish ladders to re-stimulate these migrations, the efforts at remediating fish populations have been largely unsuccessful on dammed rivers.<sup>11</sup> The altered flow of sediment along a river due to a dam's presence similarly has drastic impacts on a river's ecosystem, especially on aquatic and riparian life forms that rely on a river's specific sediment to provide certain nutrients. These are only some of the long-lasting and severe impacts of dams in the United States, which currently has the second highest number of large dams in the world, just behind China.<sup>12</sup>

While a wide variety of authors acknowledge the Bureau of Reclamation's irreversible impact on altering and damming waterways in the United States—for example, Edward Abbey's "Bureau of Wrecklamation" in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, or Wallace Stegner's *This Is Dinosaur*—few realize that while the bureau was creating public works they also sought to document their myriad infrastructural projects on still and moving film, resulting in the creation of an immense visual archive. Though this practice of utilizing photography and film was at first intended for practical purposes like surveying and documenting engineering methods, many of the bureau's early photographs illustrate a keen attention to aesthetics: form, contrast, depth, and scale are all evident in the otherwise rather banal reclamation photographs of bridges and irrigation ditches, among other projects.

One photograph of the Whalen Dam, a 1909 reclamation project in Fort Laramie, Wyoming, substitutes one of the dam's structural posts for a man's silhouette, which serves to emphasize his striking figure against a sprawling reservoir in the image's background (Figure 1.2).



*Figure 1.2* A Bureau of Reclamation photograph of the Whalen Dam in Fort Laramie, Wyoming, 1909

Like the Laguna Diversion Dam, the Whalen Dam was one of the first reclamation structures in the west, acting as a blueprint for the many subsequent dams to follow in its suit on the North Platte River in Wyoming. The Whalen Dam diverts water to farms in Wyoming and Nebraska, providing a crucial water supply to these otherwise water-deprived sites. As recently as July 2019, a tunnel under one of the dam's diversion canals collapsed resulting in both Wyoming and Nebraska declaring a state of emergency, revealing their continued reliance on the performance of now-deteriorating reclamation architectures.<sup>13</sup>

In this photo in particular, the man's corporeality becomes fused to the structure of the dam as his body quite literally replaces a post—an eerie prediction of what would become the western population's dangerous dependence on reclamation infrastructures. In the same moment that the unidentified photographer documents the process of water reclamation, they similarly reclaim water, infrastructure, human form, and landscape at a filmic and visual level. Moreover, the visual obtrusiveness and seizure of landscapes that reclamation projects demand seem to almost invite viewers to reinterpret and document these structures through the medium of film. A medium that, similar to infrastructures, seems to defy time itself. This transcendent quality of

reclamation projects, which photographers like Ben Glaha and Ansel Adams would document to a greater extent in the 1930s and 1940s, fuses together landscape and engineering in an unprecedented way. As art historian Betsey Fahlman writes, “the natural and the constructed coexisted in the sublime federal landscape of the American West.”<sup>14</sup> Irrigation, damming, and photography—practices initiated at grand scales in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century—become tethered together as the Bureau of Reclamation sought to immortalize its projects through photography, and eventually on moving film.

### **From Reclamation in Print to Reclamation on Moving Film**

The bureau’s attachment to filmic preservation is further evident in its vibrant history of print culture. The central way in which the Bureau of Reclamation disseminated updates, information, and photographs to their employees and users of irrigated water around the United States in the twentieth century was through their monthly magazine, the *Reclamation Era* which I cited previously, first printed in 1905 and out of print by 1983 (Figure 1.3).

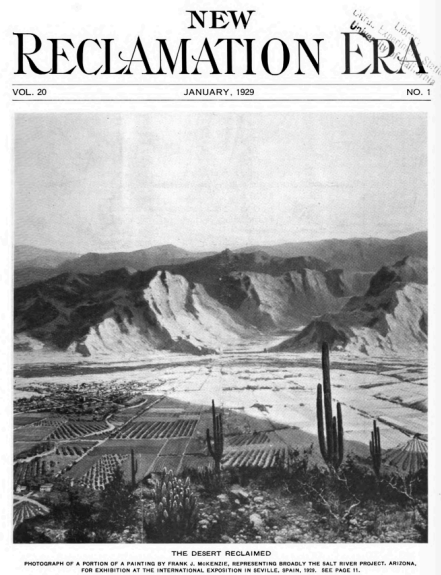


Figure 1.3 The 1929 cover of *Reclamation Era*. Its caption reads, “The Desert Reclaimed.”

Though the publication changed its name a few times—first it was the *Reclamation Bulletin*, then the *Reclamation Record*—the intentions remained constant: provide stories, informational articles, and the latest news about reclamation projects conducted across the country to users of reclaimed water. The magazine’s name changes, from “bulletin,” to “record,” to “era,” show how the publication became increasingly cognizant of the relationship between timescales and reclamation. More generally, the contents of the magazine included columns for women, notes on legal cases, and articles about engineering and construction, among other topics and stories.

But beyond the expected prose written about things like electricity and various crop yields, *The Reclamation Era* also provided updates on film creation and documented the bureau’s evolving affiliation with cinema. As early as 1908, the magazine was informing readers about the availability of moving films produced for the bureau, mostly for educational purposes, and the film circuits through which the films would be shown. According to the *Reclamation Era* in 1913, camps where reclamation project workers lived were often outfitted with theaters for

“moving picture shows” of government-produced films, signifying that cultures around film consumption were developing at the very sites of reclamation development.<sup>15</sup>

A 1924 article in the magazine reported on production companies utilizing reclamation projects as a film location for their "thrilling" movie. The article takes a tone of pride in informing readers that the motion-picture company hails from Los Angeles, and would be paying the bureau a “\$5,000 bond” to shoot scenes at the Black Canyon Dam construction site. As this article indicates, the 1920s were swiftly becoming a decade of producing silent western melodramas which consistently utilized dam constructions and breakages as dramatic stages where romance, tragedy, and comedy would take place. In these dramas, narrative became a way in which the spectacle of infrastructural disaster could be explored in safety. The *Reclamation’s* report on feature filmmaking at the dam signals a shift in the Bureau of Reclamation's approach to film. Here, we witness the transition from the bureau considering film as a purely educational tool to appreciating it as an artistic—and profitable—narrative medium when paired with the endeavor of infrastructure engineering.

### **The Bureau’s Cultural Practice of Reclamation**

During this time period of developing the aesthetic of infrastructural film, the politics of water infrastructures became dramatically and emotionally compelling to American consumers. Considering that irrigation was such a widespread practice in the first half of the twentieth century, it was only inevitable that the culture surrounding its integration into American waterways would pervade visual and film cultures. By 1950, 78,000 millions of gallons of freshwater were re-routed for irrigation purposes per day (Mgal/d), almost entirely in the western United States.<sup>16</sup> This rapid change in twentieth-century water management practices inevitably

led to the production of myriad fictions about the drama of western reclamation. Current cultural critics, such as Anthony Arrigo and Robert Dorman, tend to illustrate the Bureau of Reclamation solely as an environmentally destructive enterprise, and rightly so. But for contemporaries of the reclamation movement, infrastructures like dams and irrigation systems bringing water to the west were often considered extraordinary, magical, and miraculous subjects of storytelling in the American West, a far cry from the connotation of banality infrastructure often elicits today.<sup>17</sup> As Chad Wriglesworth notes, “previous generations of national and regional artists actually supported the Bureau of Reclamation’s vision of national progress.”<sup>18</sup> While reclamation-era structures are now recognized for their very real adverse impacts, perceiving them also as objects thick with culture and drama, not only “thick with politics” as scholar Wiebe Bijker describes them, will allow for a more holistic understanding of reclamation as a practice of culture creation.<sup>19</sup>

In 2011, environmental theorist Rob Nixon deemed the megadam a “national performance art.”<sup>20</sup> While Nixon’s assertion is timely and powerful in its recognition of dams as highly performative political acts, associating infrastructures with performance art seems to suggest that the influence of these architectures is fleeting, or ephemeral. Building off of Nixon’s assessment, I emphasize a connection between water infrastructures and their intimate relationships with filmmaking and film to accentuate the lasting, highly visceral, and tangible effects of reclamation as a cultural and geological practice. Like watching a film over and over again, dams and irrigation systems are objects of perpetual, not temporary, spectacle.

## **Filming Reclamation**

By 1939, the Bureau of Reclamation already had a history of producing government-sponsored film, despite the fact that many of these films were not documented or preserved extensively. The evidence of their existence is maintained almost completely through various articles in the *Reclamation Era*. For example, a film circuit recorded by the *Reclamation Era* in 1921 shows that films were available for distribution across the country, with films being requested from western states like Nevada and Texas to locations in Tennessee, North Carolina, and New York, indicating a national interest in the bureau's films.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the bureau reported on photography labs producing film reels, as well as on the construction of movie theaters at reclamation sites. Many films, as I delineated earlier, were simply filmic records of surveyors or educational monologues (Figure 1.4).



Figure 1.4 Bureau of Reclamation surveyors on the Colorado River.

However, these films had yet to explicitly verge into the realm of art—though some implicitly tended towards artistic methods. The bureau, up to 1939, released films about engineering projects for practical purposes, intended to generate conversations about reclamation efforts and spread engineering knowledge at a national level. This changed when the Bonneville

Power Administration (BPA), an agency described by the *Reclamation Era* as a “marketing agency for the world’s largest supply of hydroelectric power,” partnered with the Bureau of Reclamation to create a film about the Grand Coulee Dam in Washington.<sup>22</sup> Inspired by the acclaimed documentaries of Pare Lorentz’s *The River* and *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, the Bureau of Reclamation intended to produce a film that could match the artistic level of Lorentz and affect the perception of publicly owned power structures through poetic and emotional means. To accomplish this artistic goal the bureau commissioned Gunther von Fritsch, a fairly well-known director of narrative films, to lead the film’s production, while having a unique score composed by William Lava and Herman Hand, performed by the Los Angeles Orchestra of the Works Progress Administration.<sup>23</sup>

This film, released in 1939 as *Hydro*, doesn’t necessarily have an explicit plot, but attempts to create a sweeping narrative of reclamation history in the western United States and convince Americans of the many benefits of dam-building, particularly economic benefits. In *Hydro*, the audience is presented with a narrator who describes the history of the Grand Coulee Dam, which was completed in 1936 on the Columbia River. The film argues that because the lumber industry is finite and less profitable than it used to be, citizens should look to relying on hydroelectric power for the future of energy consumption in the United States. Through a mixture of animations, historical footage, shots of landscapes, and images of infrastructures, the film seeks to convince its audience that western reclamation is an economical, glorious, and necessary endeavor.

The filmic visuals of *Hydro* are striking and full of propagandistic meaning. For example, *Hydro* consistently situates images of the quotidian farmer and housewife, the proclaimed beneficiaries of hydroelectric energy, against the monumental, almost unthinkable scale of the



hydroelectric dam. In doing so, *Hydro* takes something incomprehensible—the immense engineering feat of the Grand Coulee—and translates it into something literally consumable—the decreased energy prices citizens could experience if reclamation was enacted across the Pacific Northwest through an increase in hydroelectric infrastructures. For the Bureau of Reclamation, writing and making an aesthetically inspired film intended to affect people as a piece of art also functioned as a way to generate support for reclamation projects, resulting in their subsequent constructions. According to data from the National Inventory of Dams, this very trend occurred in the United States. From 1940 to 1980, the United States experienced the largest surge of dam-building in its history, with a total of 49,448 dams constructed during this forty-year period—over half of the total dams constructed in the United States from 1640 to 2018.<sup>24</sup> Considering that *Hydro* was released at the inception of this era, the film undeniably reflects the continued manifestation of settler colonialism in the American West, which contributed to such an immense growth in infrastructure during this time. As such, filmmaking became a mechanism of extractive infrastructural development.

The images chosen by the Bureau of Reclamation and BPA to advocate for the mass proliferation of damming and irrigating in the western United States reflect a discourse of conquest, mastery, and redemption. *Hydro* begins with a barrage of images romanticizing the Pacific Northwest, showing wide landscape shots of the Columbia River and its surrounding mountainous scenery, contrasted with close-ups of wheat fields and scenes of pine tree forests. Between these views of an idyllic, untarnished nature, shots of infrastructure construction sites and city skylines are interspersed, fusing together the act of reclamation construction with the natural biomes and agricultures of the Pacific Northwest. As this collection of images rolls by, the narrator’s voice describes a “saga” of conquering the American West and the Columbia

River, a story described with the tone of an ancient epic that begins with Lewis and Clark's expedition and effloresces into the "empire Thomas Jefferson envisioned when America was young." With *Hydro*'s introduction of a selective history of the Pacific Northwest, a history which conveniently excludes the violent removal of the Spokane Tribe and the destruction of sacred indigenous burial sites through the creation of Roosevelt Lake, the film provides its audiences with the mythological origins of conquest which, as the film presents it, inevitably lead to the reclamation of western deserts and rivers.<sup>25</sup> In the process of increasing the visibility of the Bureau of Reclamation through film, *Hydro* simultaneously participates in another kind of reclamation—a reclaiming of the American West's prevailing narrative which erases the extensive histories and rich experiences of the Spokane Tribe and their relationship with the land.

The visions of landscape and reclamation, further, are bound to the aesthetics of commerce and capitalism, reinforcing the notion of the Bonneville Power Administration as a marketing agency of energy. The camera brings the audience's attention to cargo ships full of lumber and produce docked on the Columbia River, releasing swaths of smoke into the atmosphere. The ships represent the "saga of commerce" that the narrator describes, relating the river to the empires of France and England (Figure 1.5).



*Figure 1.5* A cargo ship on the Columbia River in *Hydro*

In this screenshot of *Hydro*, the framing of the boat against the water, mountains, and sky is reminiscent of J.M.W. Turner's 1839 widely celebrated painting *The Fighting Temeraire* (Figure 1.6).<sup>26</sup>



*Figure 1.6* J.M.W. Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire*

Like Turner's portrait of an industrious tugboat dominating the once-vibrant Temeraire warship, *Hydro's* industrialized landscapes display how the Columbia River should similarly be perceived as an epicenter of capitalism, imperial dominance, and technological progress.

Released at the intersection of the Great Depression's final years and the growing tensions of World War II, it is to be expected that a film like *Hydro* would attempt to focus so much of its energy on industry and the economic benefits of reclamation projects. In addition to presenting landscape scenes which hearken back to Turner's nineteenth-century depictions of industrialization, *Hydro* frames reclamation as the twentieth-century version of revolutionary progress through incorporating scenes of infrastructural development. This is most notably manifested in the romanticizing of reclamation architectures and the process of their creation, which can similarly be witnessed in the 1938 murals of the Hoover Dam by William Gropper.<sup>27</sup> In Gropper's mural, *The Construction of the Dam*, the bodies of construction workers are fluid and temporary against the angular, monumental permanence of the Hoover Dam (Figure 1.7).



Figure 1.7 William Gropper's *The Construction of the Dam*, 1938

Behind the dam, an immense mountain dominates the landscape, observing the construction. The scales of the infrastructural and geological are united in such a scene, with the dam

becoming as permanent and immovable as the mountain, a sensibility which *Hydro* further echoes in its introduction of construction scenes to the film.

Like Gropper's painting, *Hydro* privileges a heightened movement and action to scenes of development, making film a perfect medium to situate portrayals of vibrant human effort alongside visions of reclamation technology and geological terraforming. As the camera pans over shots of the unfinished Grand Coulee Dam, the narrator declares, "man shifts the course of the Columbia again," elevating *Hydro*'s human subjects to the level of dominance over nature. In one scene, a collection of rebar seems to mimic previous shots of the forested landscape, generating a new, metallic replacement of the forest intertwined with men balanced on precarious scaffolding structures. Even in this unfinished state, the narrator compares the Grand Coulee Dam to a "gothic cathedral" (Figure 1.8).



*Figure 1.8* A shot of the Grand Coulee Dam's cathedral-like rebar structures in *Hydro*

The visual and sonic venerating of not only finished reclamation projects, but of dams in inchoate form, signals an aesthetic investment in the technical processes of reclamation development and satisfied in film's ability to depict the drama of reclamation in progress.

Despite the high production value and many efforts put forth to make *Hydro* a popular and poetic success, the film received poor reviews from film critics in New York and Los Angeles. *Daily News*, for example, wrote that *Hydro* was "a long repetitious picture" that lacked "poetic beauty."<sup>28</sup> Audiences and critics were not as pleased with the bureau's film as they had been with the documentary style of Lorentz. Despite this, *Hydro* was eventually shown internationally in China, Mongolia, and Russia to illustrate the benefits of energy infrastructures to foreign governments.<sup>29</sup> The Bonneville Power Administration operating as marketing agency sought to advertise dams not only as producers of energy, but as structures of security, democracy, and international power—only further evidence of the continued colonialist impulse of water infrastructures well into the twentieth century. Dam-building and filmmaking, though seemingly disparate processes of modernity, become strikingly similar endeavors that inform and transform each other when analyzed together as infrastructural aesthetic practices of settler colonialism.

### **The Silent Inspiration**

The infrastructural-favoring aesthetics of the Bureau of Reclamation's *Hydro* were not unique to the film, but rather are inspired by the tropes of earlier melodramatic reclamation cinemas produced in the 1920s. The film *\$50,000 Reward*, directed by Clifford Ely in 1924, is a quintessential silent western melodrama that tells the story of a legal battle for land below a dam—land made extremely valuable for its irrigation potential.<sup>30</sup> The lead character, Tex, is the rightful heir to the land, but the nefarious, miserly bankers funding the dam's construction hope to steal the deed from him by offering a \$50,000 reward for anyone who can catch him. What

ensues is a slapstick, action-oriented film, punctuated with a romance between Tex and the dam engineer's daughter.

*\$50,000 Reward*, like *Hydro*, features a glorification of infrastructural construction sites through the camera's framing of dams as cinematic objects. The film transforms reclamation projects from complex feats of engineering into palatable and visually stimulating narrative sites, with Eltfelt using the construction materials of an actual dam—the St. Francis Dam in northwest Los Angeles—to elicit tension and drama within the story. For example, Elfelt features a point-of-view shot from the interior of an elevator in a tower that looks out over the dam. At the top of the tower, Tex wrestles with an outlaw trying to capture him, and the outlaw's body is then seen falling through the air from two different perspectives (Figure 1.9).



Figure 1.9 A shot of the falling body in *\$50,000 Reward*, visible in lower right of photo.

In this scene, the very technologies allowing for the creation of the dam engender an excitement through their inherent riskiness and capability to be sites of extreme violence and even death.

This, coupled with cinema's ability to document a deathly fall, helps to emphasize the narrative

possibilities of reclamation infrastructures and explains why they were so popular within cinema in general. For an average audience member watching *\$50,000 Reward*, dams would naturally appear as wild, dangerous, and exciting landscapes of the American West—despite the fact that these infrastructures were created around the ideas of prosperity, security, and safety. As such, the cinematic dam becomes not just a backdrop through which narrative comes alive, but instead is at the forefront of the action, absorbed with drama. The Bureau of Reclamation’s foray into reclamation cinema seeks to lessen the divide between the cinematic and actual dams, and draws on *\$50,000 Reward*’s narrative by similarly bringing infrastructure to the epicenter of its first film, *Hydro*.

The actual dam used to film *\$50,000 Reward*, the St. Francis Dam, was under construction from 1924 to 1926, just as *\$50,000 Reward* was released. In 1928, the St. Francis Dam experienced a devastating breakage in the middle of the night, leading to an unprecedented flood that resulted in the deaths of over four hundred people.<sup>31</sup> The event gained intense interest, and was reported in newspapers around the United States and beyond. The disaster, though unpredictable, confirms Elfelt’s framing of dams as arenas full of catastrophic capabilities. Reclamation dramas, therefore, do not exist only in spaces of fictional possibility, but are in actuality situated at the intersection between disastrous realities and narrative. *Hydro*, too, braids together truths with thinly-veiled fictions to achieve a similar aesthetic in their filmed narrative of reclamation redemption.

While *\$50,000 Reward* did not depict a dam disaster, later silent films relied heavily on sensationalizing infrastructural disaster narratives to carry their plots. The 1926 film *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, directed by Henry King, falls into such a category.<sup>32</sup> Based on Harold Bell Wright’s wildly popular 1911 novel by the same name, the film tells the story of



Barbara Worth, a rescued desert “waif” sought after by two suitors she must choose between by the end of the film—the long-time, brotherly friend she grew up with in California, or the dam engineer’s foster son, a New York socialite. When the engineer doesn’t listen to warnings from locals calling him to reinforce the dam, they rebel and refuse to work for him any longer, realizing they are perceived as little more than labor objects. Soon after, an immense flood ruins the dam and completely demolishes the town adjacent to it. Though some able-bodied families are able to escape the flood, the disaster shows more vulnerable individuals, like children and the elderly, struggling to survive amidst the detritus, implying an uncertain or deadly fate. In the aftermath of the flood, Barbara Worth chooses the engineer’s son as her romantic partner, and the film ends with the couple and their child in a redeemed, irrigated California.

Like *\$50,000 Reward* and *Hydro*, *Barbara Worth* features at the core of its narrative the dramatic potential of infrastructure and the thrill of construction. The process of designing, building, and completing the dam is crucial to these reclamation texts, which privilege insight into the reclamation processes rather than products. Echoing *\$50,000 Reward*, the film situates inhabitants of the American West against the greedy Eastern bankers. The engineer and his son are at first demonized as unfeeling, capitalist characters, but by the end of the film are both humbled by the ferocity of the western climate. While the dam is technically the cause of the flood, the film frames the blame on the engineer who refuses to make structural adjustments when encouraged by locals to do so. Cecilia Tichi avers that the figure of the engineer is cleansed from blame in *Barbara Worth* when he narrowly survives the flood, and while true, the dam and irrigation system are even more glorified in their bifurcated ability to transform the desert landscape into a thriving space of suburban futurity, or to obliterate it completely.<sup>33</sup> In

other words, infrastructure is inherently worthy of respect, while the human agents designing it are at fault if something goes awry.

While *Barbara Worth* is interested in the miracle of infrastructure, the film is equally enamored with infrastructure's capacity to destroy. The set of *Barbara Worth* consisted of three towns built in the middle of Nevada's Black Rock Desert, where the cast members lived and worked for three months while filming. The towns were intricately crafted and included functioning post offices, banks, theaters, and even an office for the film's newspaper, *The Barbara Worth Times*.<sup>34</sup> Yet this complexly designed, even livable, set of *Barbara Worth* was created to be eviscerated by the artificial flood, embodying Siegfried Kracauer's declaration that filmmakers "build cultures and then destroy them as they see fit... nothing is meant to last; the most grandiose creation is built with an eye to its demolition."<sup>35</sup> In the flood sequence, the camera acts as a disaster voyeur, a consumer of true demolition initiated by calculated means (Figure 1.10).



*Figure 1.10* The breaking dam in *The Winning of Barbara Worth*

The manufactured flood in *Barbara Worth* further presents a catastrophe heightened by infrastructure, what scholar Susan Scott Parrish denotes as the “second nature,” or the natural environment altered by human action often resulting in heightened risk.

And yet, *Barbara Worth* positions the flood as a space of not just tragedy, but of comic relief and slapstick-esque fiasco. The “technical achievement of manufactured weather on location,” as Jennifer Fay describes it, becomes a joyous spectacle because of its artificiality, but also because of the dissonance between the fictional engineer’s poor design of the dam and director Henry King’s deliberate structuring of the fake dam’s destruction.<sup>36</sup> Ironically, ineffective infrastructural design is manifested on film through careful engineering, and the film’s humor helps to magnify this disjuncture. During the chaos of the storm, for example, the camera observes a naked man frantically gathering his clothes and running out into the desert to avoid the oncoming flood. A mother carefully packs a donkey with her family’s belongings to escape, only to have everything bucked off seconds later by the startled animal. These moments of humor are still contrasted with dark realities, however, as the camera also watches as an elderly woman is violently run over by a horse-drawn cart (Figure 1.11). A man confined to a wheelchair is swept away by the flood. Above all, *Barbara Worth* signals that infrastructural horrors are rich, multi-faceted events that are not just harrowing, but full of other narrative possibilities—and even enjoyable to watch.



Figure 1.11 An elderly woman about to be trampled by crowds fleeing the flood in *Barbara Worth*

### **Justifying Reclamation through Disaster**

When *Hydro* received poor reviews from film critics after its release, the film's main writer, Stephen A. Kahn, wanted to remake the film with the hope of achieving greater success and acclaim the second time around. As the public relations manager of the Bonneville Power Administration, his desire also stemmed from a motivation to keep the agency in business and achieve a similar cultural reception to New Deal-era works like *The Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>37</sup> Though his efforts were stifled by World War II, when the devastating Vanport Flood occurred in 1948, the disaster re-stimulated Kahn's interest in producing another reclamation film project. While *Hydro* argued for the construction of infrastructure for almost solely economic reasons, Kahn decided to capitalize on heightened fears of flooding when the Vanport Flood completely destroyed the entirety of Vanport, a city located just 10 miles from the BPA's headquarters in Portland, Oregon. In this second film, released in 1949 as *The Columbia*, Kahn makes the case for an increase in dam-building on the Columbia River for the purposes of protecting populations

at risk to flooding, justifying the creation of infrastructure through the overlying threat of environmental catastrophe.<sup>38</sup>

In order to release the second film as quickly as possible, Kahn reused much of the same footage and narration from *Hydro*, while adding new scenes about the role of hydroelectric power in World War II, including hydropower's role in producing war ships and planes, as well as in generating energy for plutonium production, which would then be used in the atomic bomb. *The Columbia's* soundtrack, which also diverges from *Hydro*, features songs by Woodie Guthrie which aid in creating a personable, folk aesthetic between the original orchestral music. Kahn also introduced film clips of destruction caused by the Vanport Flood to visually make a case for the construction of dams. Like *Barbara Worth*, *The Columbia* relies on these images of catastrophe to evoke an emotional response and display the effects of disaster heightened by a lack of proper infrastructure, creating a narratological relationship between humans and reclamation projects.

*The Columbia* shows men, women, and children desperately fleeing the flood on foot and by car—images eerily similar to *Barbara Worth's* flood escape scene—while other shots pan over ruined houses floating in stagnant water (Figure 1.12).



*Figure 1.12* Entire houses floating amidst the Vanport Flood's debris and wreckage.

In one scene, a person in scuba gear can be seen swimming through the flood's debris. A man leads a herd of swimming cows to safety, the escaping animals positioned as equal to their human counterparts (Figure 1.13).



*Figure 1.13* Cows navigating the flood in *The Columbia*

In another shot, the camera shows a massive herd of sheep traversing across the dam over a bridge, and shows this scene from three different angles. Moments later, the camera focuses on a

shot of human workers milling about a town center. By placing these depictions of animals and humans so closely together, the film diminishes divisions between the species, who are both shown as transitory subjects, and described by the narrator as “refugees.” Humans are just as much at risk as common farm animals, no different from herds of sheep. As such, displaced people are the teleological end to lands in the west that have yet to be reclaimed. The film’s second life was given new meaning through the event of natural disaster, and thoroughly relies on a pressure to better manage the riskiness embodied in the Columbia River, the riskiness of a river running unchecked by reclamation practices. Furthermore, the bureau’s narrative becomes fundamentally altered after disaster, while still drawing on a history of silent, western melodramas that likewise relied on infrastructural hazards to make their own melodramatic narratives.

While the trauma of catastrophe is central to *The Columbia*, the film also depends upon utilizing the trauma of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl to advocate for the creation of reclamation infrastructure and irrigation systems. This is mainly done through presenting footage of displaced people crossing the American West in search of arable land. From the perspective of the jobless and disgruntled white farmer, images of the arid desert evoke another kind of environmental violence: the violence and trauma of the farmland turned to desert, land unrightfully seized from the human agent. *The Columbia* depicts destitute families packing their belongings and fleeing the dry, sandy desert in search of a promising future on the west coast, all while Woodie Guthrie’s song “Pastures of Plenty” romantically plays in the background (Figure 1.14).



Figure 1.14 *The Columbia* shows travelers en route to Oregon, trying to escape the dry Midwest.

However, as *The Columbia*'s narrator explains, the dream of a "promised land" in the west is a false reality for these migrant workers, a narrative that harshly diverges from *Hydro*'s faith in the perpetual prosperity of the American West. In another scene, haggard-looking men stand around a street corner, aimlessly looking for work (Figure 1.15).



Figure 1.15 Unemployed men waiting for work in *The Columbia*



Against these images, the development of dam technologies and dam building is portrayed as an antidote for the displaced human, creating a contrast between the dystopian reality of unemployment and the utopian belief in human agents to change and manipulate the landscape. The central aesthetic of reclamation becomes one of movement and productivity, while images of stillness, like the still water of the Vanport Flood or the unmoving workers, are perceived, like desert lands, as unproductive and inefficient. The film's shots of the running Columbia River, on the other hand, convey the movement is synonymous with industry and another way of understanding the practice of reclamation. Additionally, this transition to favoring movement further emphasizes the Bureau of Reclamation's decision to make films. From the bureau's perspective, unlike still photography, motion pictures would be more likely to enact change on someone emotionally, leading greater support and success of reclamation projects.

## **Conclusion**

At the culmination of the United States' most productive period of dam-building, Joan Didion published *The White Album*, introducing her essay "Holy Water" with the observation that "Some of us who live in arid parts of the world think about water with a reverence others might find excessive."<sup>39</sup> Here, Didion evokes the extensive history of water politics in the American West, which in and of itself is a gripping and violent story of colonialism and the residual effects of the nineteenth-century philosophy of manifest destiny. The search, conquest, and narrative of western water, like Didion's essay suggests, is closely tied with the language of religion, which is also a language of control. As the Bureau of Reclamation sought to redeem the arid west through irrigation and dam-building, like a regional baptism, it also sought complete

control over the arid landscape, and absolute dominance over the creation of the desert's narratives. Therefore, often through the arid west's implicit rhetoric of spirituality, a rhetoric evolving from its history of proselyting Jesuit priests and deity-centered focus of "manifest destiny," reclamation became the coexisting practices of infrastructural terraforming and visual storytelling, processes that supported and nourished one another in their combined efforts to salvage the unproductive desert and repurpose it into something new, fruitful, and saved.

After reclamation is enacted as a practice, it then becomes replicated on film as a fusion of fiction and reality. From silent western melodramas to films produced by the Bureau of Reclamation itself, whose filmmaking would continue well into the 1980s, and further on to dramas like *Chinatown*, *Still Life*, and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, the western desert became reclaimed at physical and fictional levels concurrently. As certain facets of reclamation become seen on film, like construction and the glorification of white, male workers, the histories of indigenous tribes, contributions of women and people of color to infrastructural development, and the destruction of riparian and desert environments is erased, presenting yet another facet of reclamation as a practice of culture creation.

The earliest Latin origins of the word *reclamation* ultimately underscore the Bureau of Reclamation's intentions in managing the water of the American West. *Reclamare*, the word's Latin root, means "to cry out against, contradict, protest, appeal."<sup>40</sup> From this etymological origin, the bureau situates itself as perpetually acting in opposition to anything preventing the success of its initiatives. Its mission is to cry out against underutilized public land under, taking uselessness as an offense to its terraforming and irrigation capabilities. By the late fourteenth century, reclamation meant to "subdue" and "make amenable to control." Finally, as early as the eighteenth century, the term was used to describe the process by which wasted lands could be

made productive,<sup>41</sup> while also used as an action one performed to save a soul in religious contexts.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the ideological priorities are made clear in the history of the bureau's identifying terminology. The Bureau of Reclamation defines its mission of reclamation as action against certain people—like the Quechan Tribe in the case of the Yuma Project or the Spokane and the Grand Coulee Dam—and certain environmental forces, particularly those causing arid climates, as a method of subjecting landscapes and people to the processes of becoming efficient in the eyes white developers working for the federal government. From the etymology of reclamation, the word can be understood as an emotional response closely tied to religious ideals of redemption, and also as an agricultural process of transforming landscapes. To reclaim, then, is to repurpose the environment through an implementation of quasi-spiritual infrastructures, which stand, as *Hydro* declares, like “cathedrals” in the west. For the Bureau of Reclamation, making the land productive includes its ability to produce culture, and so reclamation happens yet again as reclaimed landscapes are further exploited on film, and the irrigated west becomes a method of building and destroying fictional worlds. Though the most vibrant period of infrastructure construction has ended, the aesthetic legacy of reclamation persists in the landscape and in cinema, literally and figuratively creating dramatic energies that flow through the tortuous ecologies of infrastructure, water, cinema, and narrative. As these reclamation infrastructures continue to erode and decay, they will inevitably give way to other narratives, novels, and films about the American West's precarity and of the human agent's position in an increasingly un-infrastuctured world.

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