

4. INVERSIONS OF MOUNTAIN CINEMA: POST-HUMANIST ETHICS AND AESTHETICS IN ZHAO LIANG'S *BEHEMOTH* (2015)

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Mountains persist as sites of (filmic) exploration well into the twenty-first century even if the subjects and objects of exploration have changed considerably in the long course of history. Although the origins of mountain cinema can be traced to early forms of exploration cinema, particularly to expedition and travelogue films of the first decades of cinema, mountain films are rarely discussed as exploration films. Yet, viewing mountain films within a historical framework of exploration films promises a better understanding of the sensational, documentary, personal, and ecological aspects that characterize many mountain films; it can also serve as a reminder that an account of mountain cinema should not only focus on the cinematic construction of mountains through stories of ascent but also address the destruction of mountains through all forms of extractions, including the removal of mountain tops.

A historical outline of exploration cinema could be traced along shifting gazes that have variously re-oriented the scope of exploration films. In particular, one can discern changes in emphasis from exotic to authentic as well as from personal to ecocritical concerns.¹ Feeding on colonial exoticism, the imperial gaze of early expedition and travelogue films fueled fantasies of putting an end to unexplored parts of the world. In her essay “L’essence du cinéma” (1925), Germaine Dulac regards cinema as an embodiment of the liberal spirit, where one discovery always leads to the next and thereby develops our sensibilities for the new (191): “With cinema, there are no more unexplored countries, no more barriers between us and things, no more barriers between our minds and

the truth in its subtlety, and, scientifically speaking, no more errors or distortions" (194, my translation).

Thus, cinema's appeal as a means to exotic daydreaming has been readily supplemented by scientific invocations of film as a means of research and education. In response to Pierre Leprohon's *L'Exotisme et le cinéma* (1945), Jean Thévenot argued in *Cinéma d'exploration, cinéma au long cours* (1950) that the "excessive exploitation of exoticism, whether real or fake" will inevitably lead to commonplace films (31).² In order to avoid this impasse, films should cease to be exclusively entertainment but serve as a means of documentation, for which "the primary virtue must be authenticity" (Thévenot 1950, 21). Notably, combining sensational, educational, and touristic appeals, German mountain films of the 1920s and 30s, particularly Arnold Fanck's ski films, anticipated this rhetoric of authenticity so prevalent with exploration movies of the 1940s and 1950s.

In the 1960s and 1970s, one can note a reflexive shift in the explorative scope that focuses on the environment as a realm of personal self-exploration. In the documentary *Everest Unmasked* (1978), Reinhold Messner expresses this quite bluntly: "All the mountains in Himalaya and Karakoram and also Patagonia are explored. It is no longer important for the human world to explore them. What is important is to explore myself." In a similar vein, filmmakers have faced mountains as challenges that bring out new visions, styles, and techniques of filmmaking. For the Nouvelle Vague filmmaker and critic Luc Moullet, the natural setting of mountains affords filmmakers "with a clearer vision of reality" and "allows them best to discover the truth without the aid of reflection" (Moullet 1964, 53). In his films, Moullet embraces the technical and financial constraints alpine filmmaking puts on a production to reinforce his auteurist interventions. In *Les contrebandières* (*The Smugglers*, 1967), he also effectively exploits mountainous terrain as a defamiliarizing setting for his satire of patriarchal capitalism and bureaucratic authoritarianism.

In the context of the Anthropocene, such reflexive approaches to environments attain new meanings, as the act of exploration turns into a (media-) archeological endeavor that excavates anthropogenic and cultural layers that have amassed as landscapes, allowing us to see more clearly the intersections of geological, touristic, and other kinds of visual extractions. These intersections have become the focus of a number of documentaries in the past two decades, such as Michael Glawogger's *Workingman's Death* (2005), Jennifer Baichwal's *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006) and *The Anthropocene* (2018), Valentina Pedicini's *Dal Profondo* (2013), Salomé Lamas's *Eldorado XXI* (2016), or Ben Russell's *Good Luck* (2017). In the light of this explorative trajectory, I propose to include mining movies under the notion of mountain cinema. While this may appear as an inversion of mountain cinema, it also takes us back to the early fascination with the interior of mountains that

largely preceded personal and economic exploits of mountaineering. Zhao Liang's poetic documentary *Behemoth* (2015), which explores the heart of global mining in the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia, is a particularly powerful case of inverted mountain cinema. *Behemoth* not only addresses the destruction of landscape and nomadic ways of living, it also revises the genre of exploration film by subverting its rhetorical frames of the exotic and authentic as well as the personal and spiritual from ecocritical perspectives. Notably, Zhao discovered his filmic territory on a satellite map when he spent an entire year driving around the country scouting for a place: "When I was in Inner Mongolia, I was looking at the map and this area was black. I couldn't see very clearly, because there was all this thick smog from the coal mines" (Qin 2015). Zhao's anecdote inverts the classical exploration narrative: Not blank spaces or the absences of inscriptions that on traditional maps denote the unknown, but darker, saturated plots become the attraction for the explorer.

The film creates a cinematic experience of environments that are difficult to access, as they have become zones of social exclusion, economic externalization, and alienating enclosures.³ To the extent that the film deals with areas we mainly know about through statistical data of remote sensing and journalistic interviews, *Behemoth* can be described as cinematic countermapping that sheds light on human and environmental exploitation by means of guerilla filmmaking. In another sense, *Behemoth* is itself the product of a globalized cinematic vision that allows us to trace new figurations of transnational cinema. In this chapter, I aim to examine the aesthetics and ethics of the film in relation to two humanistic traditions: a cinematic and a geographic one. Both had their heydays in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1980s, geographic humanism together with Marxist geography became an important heuristic impulse for feminist and critical geography. At the same time, cinematic humanism experienced a renaissance in both China and the USA.

BEHEMOTH AND THE LEGACY OF CINEMATIC HUMANISM

Behemoth begins with a series of distant shots that show detonations at an open surface mining site. Then a slow-motion shot closes in on one of the explosions. The camera focuses on the blasting rocks as they are flying toward the camera while we hear the sonorous bass of Tuvan throat singing. Juxtaposing the traditional music of Mongolian herdsman with slow-motion images of industrial destruction creates a powerful opening image of cultural delocation and natural destruction in one of the most degraded areas of China (Yin et al. 2018). In cinematic terms, the opening shots recall the humanistic world cinema of Godfrey Reggio, in particular his use of slow motion in *Powaqqatsi* (1988), which begins and ends with images of gold mining in Serra Pelada, and

the deep medieval chanting that frames *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982). In this sense, the pre-title sequence of *Behemoth* can also be viewed as a gesture of relocation that resituates humanist aesthetics of world cinema in an area that has become a hotspot of global mining.⁴

Reggio's world cinema provides a productive point of departure for my attempt at locating *Behemoth* on a geo-cinematic map. Reggio's films are exceptional examples of experimental non-narrative cinema that have reached mainstream audiences. They also reflect a geo-political re-orientation in American avant-garde cinema in the 1980s toward global and ecological concerns (MacDonald 1992). Reggio's symphonic films offer a frame of reference in placing and marketing independent Chinese cinema in the Western arthouse market. A prominent case in point is *San Yuan Li* (2003), directed by Cao Fei, Ou Ning, and other members of the media collective of the U-thèque, which is frequently described as a film symphony in the tradition of the 1920s as well as Reggio's more recent revival of the genre (Berry 2010; Chien 2018). In his collaborations with the composer Philip Glass, Reggio not only revived this historical genre; he also updated the global humanist visions that can be encountered in film symphonies such as Walter Ruttmann's *Melodie der Welt* (*Melody of the World*, 1929). This ideological context of humanism, its complicated and, at times, complicit relationship with neoliberal capitalism, generated some controversy as to the film's exploitative aspects and Eurocentric bias (Roberts 1998).

How does *Behemoth* relate or respond to the aesthetic, ideological, and commercial legacies of Reggio's world cinema? Like Reggio, Zhao draws on archaic religious concepts, which he re-envisions by creating new images and discovering unseen realities. In paraphrase of an apocryphal source, the title sequence introduces *Behemoth* as a God-created beast that feeds on a thousand mountains. Like Reggio, Zhao is in search of a new visual iconography. Through carefully crafted tableaux shots he seeks to restore the affective power verbal narratives have lost.⁵ Perhaps the most startling set of compositions that reveal both parallels and differences between Reggio's and Zhao's mythopoetic approaches are long landscape shots that feature a naked body in a recoiling fetal position (see Figure 4.1). This visual allegory of human vulnerability and displacement is enhanced by a triangular line of refraction that—like a shard in a broken mirror—frames the human figure. The body does not seem to belong to the environment in which it is depicted, and the scene does not seem to belong to a documentary on mining. Such a glitch in realism is a recurring theme in digital world cinema, in which Thomas Elsaesser (2009, 5) detects an ontological skepticism toward the photographic regime. In the case of *Behemoth*, this is articulated through an alliance between digital video and painting. The artistic composition and arrangement of these shots test the limits of the documentary genre and probe the ethics of art. Is it possible to



Figure 4.1 Human displacement and cinematic refractions of reality in *Behemoth* (2015)

contemplate the scarred landscape as aesthetic objects and investigate them at the same time as sites of human suffering and exploitation?

The ambivalent affective appeal of the images is reinforced by the poetic frame of the documentary, which frames the filmmaker's journey to the coal and copper mines in the Wuhai area as an adaptation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Throughout the film we see a coal miner carrying a large mirror on his back. Like Virgil in the *Divine Comedy*, he guides the filmmaker and his audience through purgatory, hell, and paradise. The mirror in *Behemoth* and, by metonymical extension, Zhao's camerawork do not return reality

but give us a mytho-poetic map. Like a color-shaded topographic map, the different circles or stations in the film's journey follow a symbolic color scheme (see Figure 4.2). As in the *Divine Comedy*, the journey starts at the edges of a bygone idyll. Amid highly saturated green pastures, enormous heaps of coal waste form a mountainous landscape, which takes us from the dark pits of the coal mines to the inferno, a copper smelter that is gradually revealed in a long fade from red. The purgatory is dominated by shades of gray and shows the tolls the black lung epidemic takes on the workers' and their families' lives. Surprisingly, the journey ends in one of the many ghost cities that have emerged in the wake of China's massive construction movement but only gradually populated, giving an eerie and surreal testimony to the country's economic and environmental dilemmas. In contrast to Dante's Heaven, Zhao's invocation of a paradise is not a transcendental vision or a dream but the clashing reality of China's urbanization plans. Rather than displace and distort reality, the literary and mythological map helps to trace a reality that is excessively overwhelming and inconceivably surreal. In a cartographic gesture that parallels the destruction of nomadic land, Zhao shows us a rarely seen territory through the inventory and interiority of world-cultural maps.

Behemoth can be seen as a creative act of mapping out the deterritorialization of Mongolian culture. By appropriating a canonical work of world literature, it also projects a map of global cinema. The poetic frame marks not only a generic, artistic, and medial transposition, it is, above all, also a transcultural one.⁶ Dante's *Divine Comedy* both defamiliarizes and familiarizes. While the fictionalized frame increases aesthetic distances, it also brings a distant and largely invisible reality closer to the European cultural imagination. To the extent that the *Divine Comedy* is often read as a harbinger of Renaissance humanism, its remediation in *Behemoth* invites a reflection on the changes in humanist (and humanitarian) ideologies that have informed both Chinese and Western filmmaking since the 1980s, its ambivalent reception and recent revival on national and global scales. Zhao's invocation of the screen as a broken mirror can be interpreted as an ontological critique of photographic realism and an affirmation of new subjectivities emerging from the intersection of digital and painterly frames. I want to address the ethical ramifications of this skepticism and describe what may be called a post-humanistic aesthetics that programmatically embraces the tensions and contradictions of cinematic humanism.

Feature-length manifestoes of cinematic humanism can be traced back to the late 1920s, where films such as Walter Ruttmann's *Melodie der Welt*, (*Melody of the World*, 1929) provided an idealistic counterpart to the cinematic materialism of the Soviet montage films such as Dziga Vertov's *Šestaja časť mira* (*A Sixth Part of the World*, 1926). Yet, cinematic humanism reached its fullest



Figure 4.2 *Behemoth's* (2015) mythopoetic journey from a bygone idyll through the inferno and purgatory of mining to ghostly real-estate "paradise"



Figure 4.2 (continued)

creative and critical potential through postwar neo-realist films. Mediating the shocking impression of seemingly unfiltered and uncensored reality through the symbolic form and the safe environment, cinema added a new geo-political spin to the tension between affective immersion and aesthetic distance. Cinema's virtue as "world-picture," which for art historian and humanist Arnold Hauser results from its capacity to blend spatio-temporal nearness and remoteness,⁷ seemed predestined for forging an international affective community of moviegoers willing to commit to transnational humanitarian causes. As Karl Schoonover points out, "[r]ealism emerged as an affective means to manage the dueling proximities of empathy and worldly goodwill. The promotion and criticism of Italian postwar films not only offer American audiences a way to reorient themselves to the consumption of cinema, but they also permit those audiences to imaginatively remap their place in world politics" (2012, 103).

Drawing on Siegfried Kracauer's account of cinematic spectatorship, in which he envisioned films that "transform the agitated witness into a conscious observer," Schoonover calls the viewer's engagement with neo-realism "the spectatorial mode of the bystander" (1997, 58; quoted in Schoonover 2012, 86). This cinematic synthesis of affective experientiality and reflective mediation became the foundation of humanist appreciation of cinema, the belief in cinema as an essentially humanist medium, the revival of cinema as a universal language, and a means for unified global vision and understanding of the world. As Schoonover argues, in the postwar period this spectatorial mode of the bystander was also well-suited to the "Marshall Plan ethos of global communalism involving troop divestiture, humanitarian aid, and the liberalization of markets, which at the same time endorses cultural imperialism as a means of political suppression and economic doctrine" (2012, 103).

However, cinema's power to deliver traumatic events in dispassionate form to emotionally upset while providing us with a space of contemplation was also met with skepticism. Critical detachment may give way to self-complacent consumption of shocking images. Kracauer himself became increasingly weary of humanism. For him the depiction of violence in what he called "Hollywood terror films"⁸ did not agitate viewers toward ethical outreach but merely gratified their emotional needs in a perverted narcissistic way. While humanist critics believed photographic realism of suffering would stir disinterested indignation and political agitation, critical theorists saw it as a form of degradation or even social pornography. Similarly, Ralph Ellison and James Agee have voiced their reservations about the cathartic release of humanist realism, which evaporates in hypocritical self-congratulation, transforming humanist equidistance into self-righteous complacency and moral numbness (see Schoonover 2018, 126 and 105). In response to newsreel footage of the battle of Iwo Jima, Agee famously compared the impact of the war images to the "invariably degrading" effect that pornography has on its viewers and readers (!):

"If at an incurable distance from participation, hopelessly incapable of reactions adequate to the event, we watch men killing each other, we may be quite as profoundly degrading ourselves and, in the process, betraying and separating ourselves the farther from those who we are trying to identify ourselves with" (179).

For Agee, the degrading effect results from a socially perverse imperative to consume atrocious war images in order to "nurture our patriotism, our conscience, our understanding, our sympathies" (2005, 179).

As Carolyn Dean (2004, 20) observes, even though the pornographic metaphor proliferated in social and art criticism, the iconophobic, male gaze that pierces through this metaphorical blending of carnality and carnage is rarely acknowledged. This is all the more surprising as pornography is almost exclusively discussed as betraying an evidential, indexical reality. A notable and influential case in point is Frederic Jameson's contention that the visual as such is "*essentially* pornographic" (1992, 1), which renders actual pornographic films as mere "potentiations of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body." It seems that Jameson's iconophobia has fully succumbed to the fetishist logic of a possessive (male) gaze. In Jameson's pornographic regime, everything is objective and objectified, commodified and deeply alienated. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard uses pornography to describe an increasing technological abstraction of the body,⁹ as subjectivity seems to evaporate in the hyperreality created by the ubiquitous presence of images and screens. The impersonality of the image, which for the humanist was a prerequisite of cool, political reasoning, for the postmodernist has

become a means of re-realizing the world. If in the humanist aesthetics the immersive detachment works toward a common sense of awareness, the porn-metaphor suggests that the affective immediacy of the image allows no delay for reflection and denies the viewer a place in this reality.

The photographer and theorist Allan Sekula (1984, 45) describes this humanist aesthetics as experiencing “a cognitive dissonance in having been caught between the false power and the impotence of the pornographic spectator.” Whereas the false power refers to the privileged vantage points of the camera that may pose as an immediate witness at a war site or as a surveyor at great heights in the case of aerial shots, the impotence of the photographic spectators results from their inability to ascertain the reality of the real. Sekula argues that the camera not only empowers the viewer’s gaze but also charges it with the “universal sympathies” of the photographer as “the exemplary sufferer, the risk taker, the heroic embodiment of courage and moral outrage. [...] By promoting the war photographer as a ‘concerned’ and ‘innocent’ witness, liberal ideology promotes an image of its own bogus humanism” (Sekula, 45–46).¹⁰

It is easy to see how Reggio’s neo-humanist world cinema becomes a welcome target for this kind of criticism. The Qatsi trilogy aims at maximizing the kinetic effect of cinema and putting the viewer into a trance-like state. It is cinema in search of a world-picture or, as Reggio puts it, it intends “to create a mosaic, a monument, a frozen moment of the simultaneity of life as it existed in one instant at the Southern Hemisphere” (MacDonald 1992, 388). Martin Roberts classified the liberal humanism of *Baraka* (Ron Fricke, 1992) and *Powaqqatsi* as “coffee-table globalism” (1998, 66–67) that follows the tradition of the National Geographic Society and takes its inspiration from Joseph Campbell’s universalist mythologies. “While ostensibly celebrating global cultural diversity, the film [i.e., *Baraka*] seems most concerned with framing that diversity within an overarching humanism, affirming a commonality which transcends cultural difference” (68). Seen through Renato Rosaldo’s concept of imperialist nostalgia, “[w]atching films such as *Baraka*, it could be argued, enables First World audiences to mourn what capitalism has destroyed while at the same time absolving themselves of any responsibility for it” (Roberts 1998, 69).

In order to fully understand *Behemoth*’s relation to this tradition of cinematic humanism, we need to account for the radically different role humanist realism played in China during the 1980s. Cinematic humanism offered an ideological framework to challenge orthodox Chinese national narratives (Lu Xinyu 2010, 22). Humanist realism was sufficiently compatible with doctrines of social realism; yet it also allowed for subversive ways of undercutting materialistic doctrines of class on an idealistic plane. The focus on the body and the individual could serve as a strategy of declassification (*qujiejihua*) and depoliticization. As Gao Minglu points out:

The “individual” not only refers to a particular individual, but more importantly it can be abstractly defined as any ordinary, non-politicized Chinese person. And furthermore, this ideal nonpoliticized Chinese person can be representative of truth, goodness, and beauty, i.e., what is conceived of as the true human nature uncorrupted by any political propaganda. (2011, 66)

Godfrey Reggio's humanist world cinema can be productively compared to the ethnographic epics that in the 1980s delivered international acclaim to the fifth generation of Chinese filmmakers. Movies such as Fei Xie and U Lan's *Xiangnu Xiao Xiao* (*A Girl from Hunan*, 1986) and Zhang Yimou's *Hong gao liang* (*Red Sorghum*, 1987) break with the canonical tradition. They programmatically return to tribal cultures, celebrate the body as a site of primitive origins, and offer an alternative national narrative in the form of a depoliticized humanistic myth. Yet, the invigorating power of this creative humanistic mythology is also susceptible to nostalgia and a national self-exoticization. For Zhang Yingjin, *Red Sorghum* stands in between “a critical mode of reflection and the exhibitionistic mode of visualizing China” (2002, 223) that supplies the global market's demands for self-satisfied tourist fantasies (cf. 2002, 250).¹¹

POST-HUMANIST AESTHETICS AND CINEMATIC CARTOGRAPHY IN *BEHEMOTH*

The inversion of such cultural historical travelogues in *Behemoth* can be seen as a response to contested humanist aesthetics. I propose to see this as a characteristic post-humanist strategy in digital global art documentaries. This includes re-affirming aestheticization as a strategy of affective dissonance that goes beyond a cynical mode but re-affirms the body as a sensory political site. *Behemoth* can be placed in a group of recent artistic documentaries that—like the ones mentioned at the beginning of this chapter—experiment with hybrid forms of observational documentary and poetic or essayistic forms that integrate participatory and dramatic modes and programmatically blur the border between art, documentary, and fiction.

Throughout Zhao's work one can observe a persistent inquiry into the ethics and politics of form that focuses on affective dissonances. In this sense, *Behemoth* is not a radical departure from his earlier documentary films, but perhaps better understood as an attempt that synthesizes his documentary and artistic work. Like Salomé Lamas's *Eldorado XXI* (2016), *Behemoth* exists in different versions: One uses voice-over narration and is geared toward both theatrical and TV release; the other, closer to the director's intentions, is made for art exhibitions and uses on-screen titles.

The lack of spoken words in *Behemoth* underscores Zhao's intentions to “communicate a sense of conflict within the quiet image” (interview with Lu

Yangqiao 2015). It is stirred by distrust of language, narrative, and drama to coopt our sympathy and compassion for calculated rhetorical effects. Zhao's attempt to resist a ready conversion of feeling into sentiment recalls the distinction between "eloquent pity" and "mute compassion" (Arendt 1990, 85). Pity projects a grammatical subject, whose verbose articulation imposes a sense of superiority of the speaker while depersonalizing suffering into a generalized other. Hannah Arendt describes pity as a perversion of passion; passion rendered in words, which she contrasts with reasonable and dispassionate transformation of compassion into political acts of solidarity (1990, 88). Zhao's move toward a dispassionate aesthetics is motivated by a search for deeper understanding and increased awareness; yet, he also distances himself from activist aspirations.¹² Perhaps illustrated best in the use of the naked model and its manifold associations with colonized landscapes, human and environmental vulnerabilities, Zhao is interested in creating feelings, orchestrated by new bundles of affect, which he compares to finding a new visual language that revives "a more ideal form of cinema, a more pure mode of viewing [...] [that] allows more space of imagination than language" (Lu Yangqiao 2015). In contrast to Reggio's invocation of a visual language that is technologically up-to-date and in tune with the zeitgeist,¹³ Zhao's language of an ideal cinema is closer to an (earlier) understanding of film language as an alternative to language that explores new sensory forms.

This accounts for the overall hybridity of the film that combines mythical frames and highly crafted tableaux with investigative and activist impulses by juxtaposing a personal dreamlike vision with a world-literary narrative. The push-and-pull effect created by mythically framing such aestheticized images pervades the film as an overall aesthetic strategy and complicates both a critique of humanist cinema and its Eurocentrism. By adopting Dante's device of a dreamlike vision to capture the apocalyptic atmosphere of the mining landscape, Zhao erodes inner and outer realities, which Kracauer diagnosed as a narcissistic fallacy of humanism.

Zhao's post-humanistic approach entails a spatial critique of geographic governance (Crampton 2004) that challenges the coordinate system of orthodox cartography and invites us to rethink the relationship between cinema and cartography in the context of contemporary geospatial technologies. As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, Zhao's anecdote about discovering his cinematic expedition through smog-colluded territories on a satellite map inverts the classical exploration narrative. *Behemoth* explores "new varieties of terrae incognitae" (Wright 1942, 2), which in John K. Wright's vision of geosophy call for forms of aesthetic imagination and compel us to reassess the scientific and political role of affect and imagination. The film speaks well to Wright's geosophic interventions that call for the transdisciplinary (1947, 12) "study of geography from all points of view." Responding

to the climate of scientific objectivism, Wright particularly emphasized the role human subjectivity and aesthetic imagination assume in geography and called for a synoptic view of critical and imaginary cartographies. Wright's work became a key inspiration for humanistic geography of the 1960s and 1970s and its foray into existentialism and phenomenology¹⁴ and had a lasting impact on feminist geographers, who contested the alleged incompatibility of quantitative and qualitative methods by promoting situated and context-sensitive methodologies.

In the wake of computer-based geographic information systems in the 1990s, we can observe a similar debate about the compatibility between positivist productions of knowledge and disembodied (masculinist) forms of representation that have become associated with GIS practices (see Mei-Po Kwan 2002 and 2007). Similarly, the boom of policy-driven geographic research that accompanied methods of remote-sensing has been criticized for its affective dissonance and a surprising resistance to "post-rationalist styles of thinking" (Anderson & Smith 2001, 8). This is above all a critique of digital practices and not of digital technologies themselves, as feminist geographers promote embodied uses of geospatial technologies.

As in film studies, the digital turn in geography also generated a series of critical reflections that challenged orthodox assumptions of the discipline.¹⁵ In an essay published in 1990, Philip C. Muehrcke (9) compares the meta-cartographic potential of GIS to the cubist's experiments with perspectivism. A cubist perspective, Muehrcke suggests, can help us to better appreciate the improvisational and experimental dimension of cartography:

We are free to make various cartographic assumptions, and then see what the environment looks like. We are seeking cartographic effect, not geographic truth. If the effect is uninteresting, the map can be discarded (or erased from the screen), since it has little inherent value. We can get at pressing environmental issues from different angles and dimensions merely by trying different combinations of cartographic assumptions. (9)

By favoring the cartographic effect (and, one may add, cartographic affect) over geographic truth, Muehrcke underscores the mapping experience: the use of maps as explorative tools and instruments for experimentation.¹⁶

Behemoth helps to visualize the unseeable. Like a map, it is not simply presenting a reality but actively creating one. More importantly, it offers a spatial critique of geographic information systems. In placing a naked model on the edges and boundaries (see Figure 4.1), Zhao emphasizes the human scale and embodied dimension of filmic mappings. Instead of figuring merely as a symbolic self-locator, the naked model embodies a sensing device in an area of radical land change. As a spatial practice of gauging environmental

relations, cinema covers a mid-range between close and remote sensing. This is essentially a humanistic conception of cinema as world-picture that offers, as Hauser puts it, a “simultaneous nearness and remoteness of things” (1958, 243).

As a creative geography in the realm of documentary cinema that aestheticizes “referential mappability” (Stockhammer 2017, 79), *Behemoth* represents an inverse case of imaginary mappings found in narrative fictions. Instead of inserting points of referential mappability into a fictional world, *Behemoth* adds a literary frame to the referential world. This makes it particularly instructive for understanding conceptual exchanges between a cartographic understanding of maps and its metaphorical transpositions in other disciplines. While cinematic mappings have been predominately approached as (metaphorical) transpositions of cartography, a recourse to humanistic and feminist geography allows us to approach cinema from a cartographic perspective and review the symbolic, imaginary, and referential dimensions of mappings.

On a symbolic level, Dante’s poem quite literally serves as the *legend* of the map in a cartographic and narrative sense. It provides the wording of a map that is framed by Christian and humanist literary traditions. The exchange of Western and Eastern cultural legends is addressed early in the film in a conspicuous nesting of dreamlike visions. The guide who ushers the film’s lyrical I explains that the coal-mine owner erected a Buddha statue because he had a dream in which the mountain god blamed him for blowing up a mountain. The striking use of color in *Behemoth* and its twofold function as affective expressions and topographical codes underscore the imaginary transaction in the film’s orientation. It draws attention to the cartographic principle of color coding, which is also a way of collocating topographical features with affective states. Finally, in regard to the referential dimension, the film’s symbolic mapping on the basis of the *Divine Comedy* and extra-reference simultaneously affirm and undermine each other. When we finally arrive at the ghost city Ordos, the on-screen text reminds us that this is not a dream but reality. The toponym Ordos, which in Mongolian means palaces, is invested with the meaning of its internal mapping. In an interview, Zhao claims that it translates as the “palace in heaven”—forging a correspondence to the film’s internal mapping.¹⁷ We are reminded that the geo-referential function is only one dimension of toponyms.

Behemoth’s exploration of liminal spaces through a world-literary frame addresses a tension characteristic of endeavors in digital world cinema that reinvestigate colonial archives from ecocritical perspectives. In *Mined Soil* (2014) as well as in *Mangrove School* (2022, co-directed with Sónia Vaz Borges), the Portuguese filmmaker Filipa César revisits the anti-colonialist struggle in Guinea Bissau by exploring the soil and tree roots as repositories of exploitation and networks of resistance. Glawogger’s *Workingman*’s

Death (2005) not only traces the loose ends of national and global industrial networks but also reveals the uneasy co-presence of tourism and mining industries. If Dante's *Inferno* and *Behemoth* are Eurocentric projections, then they are also reminders that the excessive rare earth mining in Inner Mongolia is the result of a concerted international effort that parallels the history of cinematic humanism.

NOTES

1. For a brief survey of historical approaches to exploration cinema, see Cahill and Caminati (2020).
2. All translations from French in this chapter are mine.
3. See also Cubitt (2021, 30).
4. On the geo-political history of rare earth mining of this area, see Julie Michelle Klinger's *Rare Earth Frontiers* (2018, 67–136).
5. Both Reggio and Zhao have variously commented on their endeavors to develop a new visual language; see MacDonald (1990), Lu Yangqiao (2015), and Yu (2019).
6. Notably, the idea of structuring the filmic travelogue according to Dante's long poem was itself the product of a transnational dialogue between Zhao and his producer Silvie Blum, who is credited for the narrative script.
7. For Hauser "[i]t is the simultaneous nearness and remoteness of things—their nearness to one another in time and the distance from one another in space—that constitutes that spatio-temporal element, that two-dimensionality of time, which is the real medium of the film and the basic category of the world-picture" (1958, 243).
8. Kracauer (1946), "Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?" in *Commentary* 2, 132–36, reprinted in von Moltke and Rawson (eds), *Siegfried Kracauer's American Writings*. See Schoonover (2018), "When Cinema Was Humanism."
9. See Sobchack's critique of "Baudrillard's Obscenity" (1991).
10. For a critique of Sekula's position, see Linfield (2010), esp. 30.
11. Zhang: "Moving gracefully from the revolutionary history to the myths of a timeless China, Zhang has transformed, with Ju Dour, an Oriental story of repression, abuse, and patricide into a beautiful legend subjected to the intense gaze of the Western audience" (2002, 223).
12. Like Glawogger, he opposes "the attitude of 'I want to change the world with my movies.' [...] I fancy the thought that if an alien comes to this planet and sees the three films, he will know something about the time when I made them on Earth. That's enough." (Cynthia Lucia (2012), "'Some Friends You Have!': An Interview with Michael Glawogger," in *Cineaste* 38, no.1: 28–38.)
13. See MacDonald (1992, 382).
14. For a mytho-poetic survey of humanism and geography, see Buttimer (1990).
15. In a similar way that the digital turn generated a series of critical reflections on the virtue and history of cinema that challenged orthodox assumptions (Manovich 2001, Rodowick 2007), the revolution of geographical information systems (GIS) in the 1990s led scholars to rethink received notions and practices in cartography.
16. Rob Kitchen and Martin Dodge pushed the envelope even further by proposing a broad definition of cartography that goes well beyond professional definitions of maps. Instead of thinking of maps in categorical or constructivist terms as representations or performances, they advocate an ontogenetic or emergent conception of maps as embodied, social, and technical practices: "Maps are of-the-moment,

brought into being through practices [...]—they are always *mappings*; spatial practices enacted to solve relational problems” (2007, 335). See Les Roberts (2012) for a map of cinematographic cartographies, “Cinematic Cartography: Projecting Place Through Film.” On the deep-structural relationship between maps and films, see Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema*.

17. More generally, Zhao remarked that he only marginally modified Dante’s adaptation to fit his film.

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