



## **‘The tropics make it difficult to mope’: The imaginative geography of Alexander Payne’s *The Descendants* (2011)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyses the cinematic landscape of *The Descendants* (Payne, 2011) by engaging with Edward Said’s concept of “imaginative geographies” (*Orientalism*, 1978), a theoretical approach that addresses the interaction between the material and the symbolic in spatial representation. I also draw from Henri Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*, 1974) to explain how Alexander Payne renders space and subjectivity as mutually constitutive. *The Descendants*’ powerful analogies between family ties and land ties would illustrate this spatial-subjective system in interesting metaphoric parallels. In a similar vein, Lefebvre’s emphasis on the importance of capitalism in the social construction of spaces helps articulate the film’s discussion of Hawaiian land trade politics and the protagonists’ ambivalent relation to it. This reading of the film can be inserted into the context of contemporary revisitations of the Paradise mythology as inextricably bound to postcolonial questions of ecology, nation and globalization.

**KEYWORDS:** imaginative geographies, spatial-subjective systems, cinematic landscape, Paradise myth, *The Descendants*.

### **RESUMEN**

Este trabajo analiza el paisaje cinematográfico de *Los Descendientes* (Payne, 2011), sirviéndose del concepto “geografías imaginarias” de Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1978), un enfoque teórico que aborda la interacción entre lo material y lo simbólico en la representación espacial. También se utilizan las ideas de Henri Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*, 1974) para explicar cómo Alexander Payne presenta espacio y subjetividad como ámbitos mutuamente constituyentes. Las profundas analogías entre los lazos familiares y territoriales que se dan en la película ilustran este sistema espacio-subjetivo en forma de interesantes paralelismos. Igualmente, el énfasis de Lefebvre en la importancia del capitalismo para la construcción social de los espacios sirve para articular la discusión acerca de la política territorial hawaiana y la ambivalente relación de los protagonistas con la misma. Esta interpretación de la película puede insertarse en el contexto de las reescrituras contemporáneas del mito del Paraíso, íntimamente relacionadas con las cuestiones postcoloniales de ecologismo, nacionalismo y globalización.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** geografías imaginarias, sistemas espacio-subjetivos, paisaje cinematográfico, mitos del Paraíso, *Los Descendientes*.

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“Both maps and films assume and position audiences, ideologically as well as geographically”  
(G. Harper & J. Rainer, 2010: 15)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of Alexander Payne’s *The Descendants*, Matt King (George Clooney)’s voice-over offers a thought-provoking monologue:

“My friends on the mainland think just because I live in Hawaii, I live in paradise. Like a permanent vacation — we’re all just out here sipping *mai tais*, shaking our hips, and catching waves. Are they insane? Do they think we’re immune to life? How can they possibly think our families are less screwed up, cancers less fatal, our heartaches less painful? Hell, I haven’t been on a surfboard in fifteen years. For the last 23 days, I’ve been living in a ‘paradise’ of IVs and urine bags and tracheal tubes. Paradise? Paradise can go fuck itself.” (01:24)

With this blunt opening, the film maps the myth of Paradise’s fluctuation between the idyllic promise of its leisure delights (drinking *mai tais*, shaking hips and catching waves), and the “infernal” underbelly of its material realities, which in the monologue are symbolized by the allusion to cancers, urine bags and tracheal tubes, and in the preceding scene are visually rendered through shots that place the action at the human scale of the streetscape: Hawaiian slums, traffic jams and indigenous precariousness. The islands’ promoters would have surely omitted this bleak picture from the glamorous posters and tourist brochures of the place.

By recalling the first sentence of Leo Tolstói’s *Anna Karenina* —“All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”—Kauai Hart Hemmings, the Hawaiian writer of the novel on which the movie is based, assumes a slightly different perspective on the topic of “Hawaiian unhappiness,” but also chooses to gesture away from commonplace notions of Paradise, thus evidencing in her book’s opening quote the problematization of space and the protagonist’s ambivalent relation to it: “The tropics make it difficult to mope. I bet in big cities you can walk down the street scowling and no one will ask you what’s wrong or encourage you to smile, but everyone here has the attitude that we’re lucky to live in Hawaii; paradise reigns supreme. I think paradise can go fuck itself.” (Hemmings, 2007: 5)

Ironically enough, Matt’s complaint about the ignorance presiding most depictions of Hawaii reproduces the cultural bias with which the first European and North-American settlers of the islands (among whose descendants Matt and his family can be counted) considered the native population. Actually, in most literary and cinematic representations, Pacific islanders merely provide colorful and edenic backgrounds in which they appear as

either laughing, dancing, and feasting or depicted as dangerous, evil, and even cannibalistic. This kind of portrayals that linger long in the popular imagination have been explicitly fed by the Hollywood industry as well as by “associated agents of the imperialistic agenda such as most missionary accounts, anthropological writings, and paperback novels” (Hereniko, 1999: 18). To these discourses, there should be added the key role played by tourism in maintaining the “ongoing colonial relationship” between the United States and Hawaii (Trask, 1999: 102–3); a relationship that has been made particularly explicit after Postcolonial Studies have evidenced the centrality of tourism—understood not only as an international industry but also as a cultural form based on past and present-day colonial structures—to the processes of transnational mobilities and global connections in former colonized areas like the Pacific Rim. As Hall and Tucker (2004) state, in such places, where, under the pretext of keeping traditional socio-cultural links with former colonial powers, historical inertia has perpetuated the economic colonialism, “the detritus of post-colonialism have transformed into tourist sights (including exotic peoples and customs; artifacts; arts and crafts; indigenous and colonial lifestyles, heritage and histories)” (Craik, 1994; quoted in Hall & Tucker, 2004: 2); and everything here seems to be for sale.<sup>1</sup>

Although both novel and film coincide in dismantling the traditional *topoi* associated with the islands, it seems that this discrepancy between the real and the imagined space is even more evident when it comes to the cinematic, that is, the “reel place” (because of its more obvious “constructedness”). This paper addresses Alexander Payne’s cinematic construction of space and subjectivity through the *auteur*’s very particular rendering of Hawaiian landscape, one where the geographical interacts with the ideological and the emotional in significant ways. To this purpose, I engage with several Space theorists (Edward Said, Henri Lefebvre, Michael de Certeau, Derek Gregory and Edward Soja) and Film Studies scholars (Anthony Smith, Stephen Heath and Gillian Rose) who have explored the synergy existing between the material and the symbolic in spatial representation. As Anthony Smith states, cinematic ethnoscape always pivots around a reciprocal dialectics in which the land belongs to the people as much as the people belong to the land (Smith, 2000: 55), and in this light, the notion of place identity simultaneously endorsed and contested in a film like *The Descendants*, where personal and territorial conflict come together, has proved itself a useful means to analyze the characters’ troubling interactions with their environment.<sup>2</sup>

In this regard, it cannot be obviated that Hawaii’s assimilation into the United States is a classic case of imperialism, where indigenous cultural and material resources have been appropriated by the dominant system for political power and economic profit. Considering this geopolitical circumstance, Schroeder and Borgerson (1999: 47) argue that the interesting paradox about the 50th state is that it is a Polynesian paradise, filled with exotic natives who are Americans, or, as they put it, “they are simultaneously not like us and us.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite initial attempts at dispelling the idea of Paradise, the film depicts Hawaii as pretty much a Simulacrum of Paradise, since the visual imagery of aloha shirts, sandals and

surf beaches reinforces the messages and discourses traditionally assigned to the islands, thus producing what Derek Gregory (1994: 18) has termed a “performance of space,” or as Shroeder and Borgerson (1999: 47) put it, a packaged marketable fantasy: “Indeed, ‘Hawaii’ exists in the minds of many primarily through Hawaii’s marketed image. Hawaii, island paradise, simultaneously exotic and familiar, is more real than the group of islands in the South Pacific so named.” In addressing the marketing of the islands and their encroaching Americanization, Native Hawaiian poet, critic, and political activist Haunani-Kay Trask is even more vehement when she refers to the “state-encouraged commoditization and prostitution of native cultures through tourism” (Trask, 1999: 138). In her view, the corporate industry performs a number of unsustainable and predatory practices over both land and people which result in “environmental degradation, low wages, land dispossession, and the highest cost of living in the United States” (Trask, 1999: 144).<sup>4</sup>

## 2. ANALYSIS

After having succinctly contextualized the film’s major topics within the peculiar scenario of Hawaii’s colonial and postcolonial geopolitics, the aim of the present section is to analyze *The Descendants* as illustrative of symbolic and performative perceptions of space, especially those formulated by Derek Gregory (1993), Edward Said (1978), Henri Lefebvre (1974), and Michael De Certeau (1984). To different extents, they are all engaged in the so-called “Spatial Turn,” a critical paradigm that, since the 1970s has attested to the changes of the notion of space from traditional geography to current socio-cultural anthropology, thus looking at its metaphorical application to other spheres of knowledge.

For Gregory (1993: 18) it is the “accumulations of time and the sedimentations of successive histories” that constitute the subjective participation in a given imaginative geography. His emphasis on the performative and imaginary dimension of space is thus significant because he implies that spaces become spaces as we practice and appropriate them, and that they are constantly re-constructed or resignified through our performances: “representations are not mere mirrors of the world; they enter directly into its fabrication” (*ibid.*: 121). In the film, the monuments and relics that participate in Gregory’s performative understanding of space are the natural landscapes of the islands rendered in a sort of pastoral rhetorics. And if Pastoral is indeed a genre about redemption after fall and loss, *The Descendants* offers the landscape and its environmental resonances as the bucolic context for the family’s self examination and its cathartic regeneration after the wife’s tragic death, the husband’s discovery and forgiveness of her adultery and the girls’ reconciliation with their negligent father.<sup>5</sup> Actually, one of the climactic scenes of the film takes place on the southeast coast of Kauai, where Matt and his two daughters contemplate an edenic –and still empty– oceanfront valley. At this precise point, Matt’s decision between preserving that

virgin beach and the 25,000 acres of surrounding land or selling them off for resorts and condos is left momentarily suspended as the narrative focus shifts to the protagonists' renewed familial relationship.<sup>6</sup> This scene is highly charged with voyeuristic overtones that encode the power relations of Matt's and her daughters' gaze. Their contemplation of the valley from an elevated spot at the top of a nearby hill is an act of appropriation and self-legitimation by the King family as the inheritors of the territory, and can be interpreted as part of what Gillian Rose called *scopic regime*: "the ways in which both what is seen and how it is seen are culturally constructed" (Rose, 2001: 6). Furthermore, by encapsulating the territorial reality of Hawaii in a single shot, the cinematic image of such a particular place seems to work metonymically, or, as Fredric Jameson puts it, "suggests the possibility of cognitive mapping as a whole and stands as its substitute and yet its allegory all at once" (Jameson, 1992: 79). This is achieved through an effective juxtaposition of the protagonists' close-up and the bird's-eye's view through which the landscape is depicted. With this concomitance of human and natural landscape, Payne seems to address a fundamental tension between proximity and distance, body and mind, sensorial involvement and detached observation.<sup>7</sup> If, as anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests, the perception of landscape is an act of remembrance (Ingold, 2000), then we can infer that Matt's viewing of the uncontaminated place (that is, of nature emancipated from the human presence) is in fact a form of calling up an internal image stored in his mind and of engaging with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past. Actually, while fascinated by this awe-inspiring sight, their conversation fills up with nostalgic overtones:

MATT: Take a good look, girls. This is part of your great-great great-great mother's inheritance going all the way back to Kamehameha I.

ALEXANDRA: Down there is where Mom and I would camp.

MATT: We all did, all our lives. A lot of memories...Everything has its time.

SCOTTIE: What about me? I want to camp. (56:49)

To a similar extent, this visual representation of Paradise as simultaneously familiar and exotic, together with the film's dialectics of preservation and profit should be inserted into the context of many other contemporary revisitations of the Paradise mythology which are inextricably bound to questions of ecology, nation and globalization and that Sharae Deckard justifies as a vicarious strategy of sorts: "In compensation for the loss of an *elsewhere* and for the homogenizing effects of market standardization, global capitalism offers up a manufactured exoticism, an array of postcolonial commodities and tourist paradises catering to inauthentic nostalgia and the 'impossible search for uncontaminated experience'" (Deckard, 2010: 15). Seen in this light, this pristine piece of land where, as Matt King says to his daughters, he and his family have had the exclusive privilege of camping for years, stands as the nostalgic "elsewhere" and ultimately, the constructed and longed-for Paradise that would compensate for other losses and failures in his life.

The performative notion of space and landscape (that is, the idea that we do not simply occupy, but ultimately produce the space we inhabit) can be explained through the rhetorics of belonging and not belonging that Edward Said formulates through his concept of “imaginative geographies.” The representations of other places, peoples, landscapes, cultures and natures; the ways in which they project the desires, fantasies and prejudices of their authors; and the intricacies of knowledge and power between the subjects and objects of these representations have lately become a priority for postcolonial writers and critics, but when Said formulated them in 1978 (the year of publication of *Orientalism*) he was anticipating poststructuralist ideas about the situatedness of knowledge and the positionality of the viewing subject (Derrida, 1981; Haraway, 1988). In Said’s terminology, “imagined” is used not to mean “false” or “made-up,” but “perceived,” as it refers to the perception of space created by certain images, texts or discourses. Through what the Palestinian critic calls “a poetics of space,” material places are endowed with a symbolic or imagined meaning that is not “naturally” associated to them.<sup>8</sup> As Said’s geographies usually imply inhabited spaces, the notions of difference and sameness are closely related to the social production/performance/experience of place, or to the ways a given space becomes associated with notions of inclusion and exclusion:

[T]his universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is “ours” and an unfamiliar space beyond “ours” which is “theirs” is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary. I use the word “arbitrary” here because imaginative geography of the “our land/barbarian land” variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for “us” to set up these boundaries in our own minds; “they” become “they” accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from “ours.” (Said, 1994: 54)

This is a dichotomy that Matt King, the film’s protagonist, applies to islanders and mainlanders respectively when considering the rhetorics of misrepresentation with which they conceive each other. Ironically enough, this distinction between belonging and not-belonging is fractalized *ad infinitum*, as Matt experiences this sense of alienation even in relation to, first, his own estranged nuclear family (with his comatose wife Elizabeth and his rebellious adolescent daughters for whom, he admits, he has always been “the back-up parent”); and second, to his own cousins (initially perceived as part of the Same/Us/The Descendants) with their particular understanding of land property.

The background story of a trust with large land holdings in Hawaii echoes the realities of land and power on the islands and is a central point in the plot: Matt King and the other descendants of a Hawaiian princess and *haole* banker have inherited a piece of land which they (land rich but cash poor) must decide whether to sell to developers because, under the rule against perpetuities, the trust in which it is currently held is subject to an expiry date.<sup>9</sup> Despite this realistic scenario, the film presents the conflict as a question of identity (place,

cultural, personal identity), and as such, Matt establishes his own exclusionary boundaries to protect his interests by acting in a considerably aristocratic way that distances himself from native Hawaiians (whose natural heritage he claims to defend), and from his relatives, whom he contemptuously disdains as vulgar, wasteful and irresponsible. He seems to play the secessionist part by not simply enrolling in exclusive private clubs and sending his eldest daughter (his own “descendant”) to an expensive boarding school, but by, for instance, showing no interest whatsoever in genuine local food or music when he meets his cousin Hugh (Beau Bridges) in the Hawaiian bar, thus widening his distance from his extended family.<sup>10</sup> Though considering himself the legitimate trustee of the family inheritance holding the final decision about its future, he does not offer any convincing reason for not developing the land beyond a desire that his young daughter might camp in that virgin land, or some vengeful spite against his wife’s lover, who might make important commissions out of the land sale; in any case, he demonstrates an extravagant attitude that might make us re-evaluate his motives as more self-interested than what they initially appeared to be. In a metaphor that stresses this central analogy between land ties and family ties, Matt King muses about his insularity as both a geographical and a relational condition: “A family feels exactly like an archipelago, all part of the same whole but still separate and alone, and always drifting slowly apart” (17:30). As the quote illustrates, when landscape is employed as metaphor, spatial meaning is made to interact with the subjects’ cognitive map—one completely determined by the socio-cultural politics of these metaphors.

But where Said invites us to imagine new topographies, in which cultural, professional, experiential categories initially perceived as separate, become inescapably hybrid and interpenetrating, as “intertwined histories and overlapping territories” (chapter one of *Culture and Imperialism*), the imagined spatial and cultural distinction of *The Descendants* ends up reducing its human geography into a space of inequality and difference (between the Same/Us and the Other/They), thus ignoring the elements of hybridity which, though inherent to Hawaii’s cultural gist, are flagrantly silenced in a story entirely focused on the local white aristocracy (*haole*). Despite Payne’s initial attempt at demystifying the islands’ exclusive association with tourism, by providing some historical context about its Western immigration and settlement and by stressing the miseries and misfortunes of islanders, his picture of Hawaii is ultimately a very racially and socially homogeneous one that leaves out many important questions. Hawaii born critic Constance Hale complains that the film “over-focuses on the lives of Hawaiian one-percenters, instead of the real lives and real concerns of 1) folks with more connection to their Native Hawaiian roots than Matt King; 2) folks who don’t get to live in glorious houses in Nu’uanu Valley and send their kids to expensive schools; 3) the racially interesting, socioeconomically diverse, medically and culturally vulnerable *hoi polloi* that are shown in the first few minutes of the film, then abandoned” (Hale, 2012). Among the many absences and silences she detects in the film are,

The larger story of the ways that the deeds and misdeeds of Hawaiian royalty, New England missionaries, and the haole oligarchy left bruises still tender to the touch. The story of how a determined band of haole are suing Hawaiian institutions like the Kamehameha Schools to get a share of the very small privileges Native Hawaiians still enjoy after having lost their land, their communal way of life, their full access to mountains, shorelines, waters. The story of how some Native Hawaiians are trying to wrest back some sort of sovereignty analogous to that held by other Native Americans and how other Native Hawaiians are making sure that music and dance and language come roaring back from near extinction. (Hale, 2012)

With the narrative focus firmly placed on the sentimental plot, the film neglects important questions that the novelist (with a more genuine vision of the place) does consider at least peripherally: to what extent can local environments be protected in a context of ecologically unsustainable mass tourism?; how can indigenous communities (both exploited and complicit) defend their culture when confronted with the demands of global commoditization? There is nothing wrong with Payne's option, but perhaps a story that opens with such a blatant claim against cultural misconceptions of Hawaii could have drawn a fuller or more comprehensive picture of the place; or at least one addressing –if only tangentially— the dialectical tensions between tourism developers and indigenous groups, each with their own differing ideologies of development and sustainability. Such discontinuity between the meanings of space and the demands of fiction could be explained through Stephen Heath's indispensable essay "Narrative Space," which theorizes place as contained by and subordinated to the narrativizing function of dominant cinema. Heath (1981: 37) speaks of "the conversion of seen into scene," a process which, like other self-effacing modes of ideology, generates an imaginary sense of unity and coherence of pictured events that makes them appear as natural and inevitable. To a great extent, events "take place" and transform it into narrative space. In this light, the specificity of Hawaii's places and the contingency of the characters' bodies serve the purpose of facilitating the smooth storytelling of the family romance in *The Descendants* and the articulation of an explicit territorial politics. In a similar vein, Pierre Bourdieu makes an accurate differentiation between physical, social, and "acquired" space, when he states that in hierarchical societies, spaces become hierarchized and this process is masked "through naturalizing effects that come along with perpetual enrolment of social realities in the natural world" (Bourdieu, 2002: 160).

Following Said, Mohamed Al-Mahfadi argues that this notion of privileged communities strongly attached to a given geography is invested by fantasies of power and identity: "A dominant vision of essentialized community was extracted by a spatiality structured and territorialized by power into a centre and a margin. It is this spatiality that was complicit with colonialism, the phallogocentric constitution of sexual difference, and the bourgeois construction of classed difference" (Al-Mahfadi, 2011: 7).<sup>11</sup> In the case of *The Descendants*, this "naturalized" and "hierarchized" spatiality referred to by Heath, Bourdieu and Said is visually rendered through panoramic and bird's-eye's shots of Hawaiian



landscape, but its aim at totality inevitably collapses as the emotional scenario of the story ends up acknowledging partial and changing membership, contingent insiderness, uncertainty, losses and absences. Less fascinated than Heath by the ideological potential of cinematic space, Rhodes and Gorfinkel (2011: xiv) point out that “spaces, and even specific places, become the grounds for a thinking of totality, even if that thinking will always be a thinking of the totality’s unrepresentability.”

At the film’s end, Matt concludes that for whatever reason, the family was born Hawaiian and entrusted with making the weighty decision about how to develop the land. He may be referring specifically to the piece of land under litigation, but thematically he’s referring to the responsibility one has over someone else’s life: his wife, whose life-support he has just terminated, and his daughters whose care he has to assume now as the single parent. This is an interesting example of how landscape becomes allegorical, in an interesting move from locality to totality, albeit an impossible totality.

This powerful interaction of family ties and territorial ties (which has been always idiosyncratic to Hawaiian indigenous culture)<sup>12</sup> can be addressed as part of what Henry Lefebvre called a “spatial-subjective system,” a series of mutually constitutive relationships and processes which contribute to the production and reproduction of space and subjectivity. Lefebvre (1991) contests the Cartesian binary that has presided traditional definitions of space (mental vs. material, subject vs. object) by proposing instead a triad of scales. First, “perceived space,” dealing with the emotional and behavioural dimension surrounding people’s bodies and with the organizational practices that situate them as part of households, neighbourhoods, villages, cities, regions, nations and the global world. Second, the “conceived space,” referring to our conceptual knowledge of spaces which is primarily produced by discourses of power and ideology, that is, “the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers.” The third space is the “lived space,” or in Lefebvre’s words, “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (*ibid.*: 38–39).<sup>13</sup> This system of spatial interaction in which the social, representational and psychic are brought together is much more useful to my argument because it comprises the space of users in everyday life, the mental space, and the space influenced by wider social, economic and political processes. Lefebvre resorts to the metaphor of the French cake *mille feuille* to illustrate the superimposition of social spaces as layers that interpenetrate one another; a complex spatial practice that, when applied to *The Descendants*, would help explain, for instance, the interesting metaphoric parallel between the wife and mother Elisabeth (associated with the uterine spaces of the body, the bed and the home) and the Hawaiian land entrusted to the King family, as both are endangered and threatened by outsiders. It is worth pointing out that the character of the foreign intruder Brian Speer who is supposed to separate the mother from the family, plans to take over the family soil too, a sort of double usurpation, and an indirect reference to Hawaiian land trade politics, with outsiders (mainly Japanese, Australians,

Canadians, and New Zealanders) buying out the last territory left in Hawaiian hands. In this light, Elizabeth's resemblance to the figure of the last of the local sovereigns, Queen Liliuokalani, deposed in 1893 after a U.S.-military backed coup,<sup>14</sup> cannot go unnoticed, since their tragic existences seem to be articulated by analogous narratives of surrender and dispossession.

In *The Descendants*, women, like land, seem to be trafficked, manipulated, transacted, and overprotected. The agonizing maternal body of Elizabeth (because the film starts where all geography starts, in the body) resembles the endangered condition of Matt's family land, a situation that obliges him to make important decisions in relation to both. But this feminization of the land is not surprising at all considering that, in the Western imagination, Pacific islands have been usually depicted as feminized paradises offered to the male European gaze. Colonial and sexist representations often converge in the description of this tropical geography where women, sexually available and disassociated from Western notions of sin and guilt, are equated to savage and primitive nature, full of waterfalls and lush vegetation, where they move to the sensual rhythm of hula dance, performed and consumed as an exotic, alluring spectacle for the male gaze.<sup>15</sup>

After all, *The Descendants*' deviation from traditional 'masculine' topographies –the pub, the road, the epic surfing waves– and the exploration of other *loci* and visions –the woman's body, the living room, the hospital– suggest an explicit demystification of the tropical islands but they might also imply a re-feminization of space (if we take into account that in the representation of Hawaii, there has always existed a powerful conflation of Paradise, the female and the exotic, with notions of ownership and American consumer culture). This obsession with preserving the woman and the territory as the last remnants of a male colonial system, where both the female and the land are positioned as ripe for plunder and possession, can be seen as echoing what McClintock identifies as imperial tropes of domination and exploitation and reflects "male anxiety and paranoia about boundary loss" (McClintock, 1995: 24). This would explain Matt's attempts to compensate for the fear of emasculation that he experiences as the deceived husband, the ignored father and the dispossessed landowner.

Alexander Payne, who has evidenced a keen sense of place in most of his road movies—this Hawaii is apparently as demythologized and peculiar as the Nebraska of *About Schmidt* (2002) and *Nebraska* (2013), or the California wine country of *Sideways* (2004)—seems to repeat the same formula as an appropriate frame to address the conflicts of dysfunctional families and/or defeated individuals. In the American imaginary, the "road" symbolizes freedom from constraints, providing characters with the possibility to travel, discover, experiment, escape, forget, but also to live and love outside the conventional heteronormative couple or nuclear family. Road movies like *Paris, Texas* (1984), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1993), *The Straight Story* (1999), *Transamerica* (2005), *Broken Flowers* (2005),

*Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), and *Nebraska* (2013) –of which *The Descendants* might be a variation with the protagonists hopping from one island to another– simultaneously express human estrangement and nostalgia for settlement and security. Payne’s adherence to the genre’s formula would explain that the family hysteria and the emotional destabilization presiding the story and suggested by the accelerated pace of the trip, relax in the final scene of the movie with Matt and his daughters peacefully gathered in front of a TV watching *The March of the Penguins*.

The choice of this highly controversial documentary for the film’s coda could be interpreted as a further example of Lefebvre’s subjective-spatial systems, in which space is invested by symbolic, ideological and moral meaning and thus bespeaks more a human than a physical geography. This nature documentary, filmed in frozen Antarctica by French director Luc Jacquet in 2005, had an important media impact because the Emperor penguins were viewed anthropomorphically as offering lessons for human behaviour in what many considered a promotion of conservative family values like stable parenthood, monogamy, devotion to offspring or self-denial. The movie captures the trials and tribulations Emperor penguins go through to start and support a family when, after a courtship of several weeks, a female lays a single egg and then takes off toward the open sea to feed some 100 kilometres away from the breeding ground, leaving the egg under the starving father’s care through freezing temperatures and snowstorms. This abnegated fatherly behaviour was hijacked by conservative Christians as a parable of family virtues, and in certain contexts the Emperor penguin became the latest role model for American men, a new enticement in the battle between evolutionists and creationists, and a powerful anti-abortionist argument: “If Emperor penguins can go to such lengths to protect their family why do people kill babies?,” Evangelical Reverend Peter Torres thundered at women who contemplated terminating their pregnancies (Choudhury, 2005). Other viewers, however, did not see the Emperors as a paragon of virtue, or maybe they just saw the creatures as what they are, birds, revealing behavioural patterns that the moralizers would surely disapprove of: ill treatment of weak chicks, prostitution, ostracism of rare albino penguins, same sex coupling, or even kidnapping acts which others interpreted as loving adoptions.

### 3. CONCLUSION

As social constructs, landscapes are never neutral in their intention or reception, and in the case of *The Descendants*, it is worth noticing how endangered paradisiacal Hawaii and inhospitable Antarctica serve to respectively open and close a story of fatherly affection against the odds in which both tropical and polar imagined geographies become the symbolic backdrop against which we are to interpret the film’s major topics.<sup>16</sup> In this light, both scenarios would qualify as what Michel de Certeau (1984) terms *space*, which “is composed

of intersections of mobile elements” and is effectively produced by ideology, movement, history and becoming. It is to be distinguished from *place*, “an instantaneous configurations of positions,” indicating stability and fixedness, implying a static sense of location, of being and dwelling (Certeau: 1984: 117).

Seen in this light, despite its initial gesture towards quotidian and demythologized Hawaii, we perceive that *The Descendants*' landscape is intentionally edenic. When addressing the persistence of Paradise motifs in contemporary literatures and cultures, Sharae Deckard argues that the fact “that the secularization of our age precludes belief in a literal terrestrial Eden does not mean that paradise has ceased to operate as modern fantasy, regulating and expressing nostalgia for that which is absent or desired” (Deckard, 2010: 1). Through an evocative montage that elevates us from a hospital bed to clouds, mountains, and horizons, that is, from the earthly to the eternal, cinematic geography serves to provide a transcendental dimension for human scale trauma. In his infatuation with the past, with ancestors, with immortality and transitoriness, Payne makes a Wordsworthian use of landscape that keeps on rendering Hawaii as a piece of heaven on earth.

## NOTES

1. The islands' packaging and marketing as paradisiacal destinations, the perceived endangering of their cultures and natural environments, and the explicit visibility of tourism's effects in these contexts have turned them into recent objects of critical scrutiny. For a detailed analysis of the relationship between tourism and postcolonial theories, see Carrigan (2011) and Hall and Tucker (2004).
2. I borrow from Cuba and Hummon (1993) to define place identity “as an interpretation of self that uses environmental meaning to symbolize or situate identity. Like other forms of identity, place identity answers the question—Who am I?—by countering—Where am I? or Where do I belong? (...) Like people, things and activities, places are an integral part of the social world of everyday life; as such, they become important mechanisms through which identity is defined and situated.” (Cuba & Hummon, 1993: 112)
3. The annexation of Hawaii in 1898 extended American territory into the Pacific as the isles' economy became increasingly integrated with the United States as a strategic provisioning spot for American whaling ships, a fertile ground for Protestant missionaries, and a new source of sugarcane production. Together with Alaska, Hawaii achieved statehood in 1959 after different attempts and refusals in which the territory's mixed population and distance from the U.S. mainland were among the obstacles.  
([http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/dispatch\\_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3159](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/dispatch_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3159))
4. From a similarly deconstructive viewpoint but in a more comedic tone, the protagonist of David Lodge's *Paradise News* (1991) offers a bitter critique of Hawaiian history that scrutinizes the mythological structure of Paradise and its origins in material exploitation: “The history of Hawaii is the history of loss...Paradise stolen. Paradise raped. Paradise infected. Paradise owned, developed, packaged. Paradise sold” (Lodge, 1991: 143)
5. In his book *English Literature in History 1780-1830: Pastoral and Politics* Roger Sales represents the pastoral mode by the five Rs: “refuge, reflection, rescue, requiem and reconstruction,” (Sales, 1983: 17) in a definition that, though primarily addressed at the literature of the Romantic period, seems to fit quite comfortably within the environmental subjectivity of *The Descendants*.

6. Payne's last movie, *Nebraska* (2013), also revolves around the relationship between family and money as it focuses on the senile father who plans to walk to Nebraska to collect his million dollars from a sweepstakes notice he has received in the mail, because at the end of his life, he is confronted with his utter emptiness, and can look only to money for meaning. Once his son finally agrees to drive him from Montana to Nebraska to collect the winnings, they embark upon a quixotic journey across the devastated geography of the Midwest that eventually leads them to Hawthorne for a kind of family reunion where it soon becomes clear that family means absolutely nothing versus money, and, just as it happens to the protagonist of *The Descendants*, his own family becomes his worst enemy. In a recent interview, the film director blatantly argued: "this is all we have in America: money with an oblique reference to family... In a culture that is a wasteland, in which more than half of Americans don't read a single book in a year, money can become both accomplishment and self, and one almost literally doesn't exist without it." (<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/dec/01/nebraska-money-family-road-movie-david-vann>)
7. Geographer John Wylie refers to this tension inherent to the very notion of landscape: "Does the word landscape describe the mutual embeddedness and inter-connectivity of self, body, knowledge and land—landscape as the world we live in, a constantly emergent and perceptual milieu? Or is landscape better conceived in artistic and painterly terms as a specific cultural and historical genre, a set of visual strategies and devices for distancing and observing?" (Wylie, 2007: 1–2).
8. When asked about the importance of setting for both her novel and Payne's film version, Kaui Hart Hemmings, insists that we should understand landscapes as tangible places but also as textualizations of inner conditions, in what sounds as a modern version of Romantic pathetic fallacy: "The setting can mirror your protagonist's mind and soul—leaves in the pool, rotting flowers and coconut husks—but it should do more than sit there. Your character needs to run up against the leaves and rot somehow. The props should infiltrate the plot."
9. The decaying aristocracy of the Hawaiian islands is a recurring theme in Hemmings's fiction. She actually grew up in the luxe neighborhoods where her books are set, and her ancestry, like her protagonist's, can be traced to a native Hawaiian who married a descendant of one of the Protestant missionaries who came to the islands from Boston in 1836 (Siler, 2011).
10. Despite Payne's claim against cultural stereotyping, the film soundtrack is decidedly Hawaiian as it includes many themes by Gabby Pahinui, known as the "Father of Modern Slack Key Guitar" and one of the leaders of the Hawaiian cultural Renaissance of the 70's.
11. Actually, Saidean echoes of the fabricated binary oppositions between a dynamic/rational/masculine/ "Occident" and an eternal/excessive/ feminine "Orient" resonate in the characterization of Matt—thrifty, workaholic, disciplined— and his wife Elizabeth—sensual, passionate, thrill seeking.
12. The *mo'olelo*, or Hawaiian cosmology, stresses the interrelatedness of the land, the gods, the chiefs and the people (Kame'eleihiwa, 1992: 2).
13. Through the notion of "spatiality," Edward Soja (1996) addresses the dynamic and relational condition of space and updates Lefebvre's concept of the spatial triad by opening the notion of Third space to questions of hybridity and Otherness because they allow the contestation and reformulation of cultural boundaries and identities.
14. [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/dispatch\\_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3159](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/dispatch_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3159)
15. It is interesting to note how just as, following Said, the Orient entered the European imagination through a series of explicitly textual practices, the landscape of Hawaii has been brought within the horizon of contemporary Western intelligibility mainly by visual imagery.
16. Curiously enough, in Jaquet's documentary Morgan Freeman's voice-over states that Antarctica was once a tropical Paradise. When, earlier in the film, Matt takes his family to contemplate the land his ancestors passed down to him, he says, "Everything has its time" (57:03), which, in the transcendental language of the story, might imply that, just as someday Paradise will freeze over, we all have a limited time here on Earth and a limited time with each other.

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