

## INTRODUCTION

American culture is heir to the deserts.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD, *AMERICA*, 1988<sup>1</sup>

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**I**N THE SHADOW OF THIS MAJESTIC PEAK, the wasteland begins.” So intones the gentle and authoritative voice of Winston Hibler at the outset of *The Living Desert*, a 1953 documentary by Walt Disney Productions. The peak in question is Mount Whitney, which is pictured on-screen in a long, static shot before the camera pans down to a view of California’s Death Valley below. Although called a “wasteland,” the film’s depiction of the “Great American Desert” instead emphasizes the vibrancy of animal life supported by desert environments throughout many western US states. “From the vicinity of Death Valley,” Hibler tells the viewer, “it reaches to the plains of Texas, and from a corner of Oregon, deep into old Mexico.” The film proceeds through a series of vignettes that combine narration, music, and editing structure to construct anthropomorphized dramas around the activities of animals and insects. A male tortoise foraging for food finds itself in a medieval “joust” for the affections of a female; a red-tailed hawk is “frustrated” by an elusive swarm of bats; a peeps wasp exerts “fanatical energy” to paralyze and drag a tarantula into its nest.

While now a familiar format employed by the likes of David Attenborough and National Geographic, the organization of *The Living Desert* was formative for the genre, winning an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature. Its gimmicks, however, were not universally well received. In a *New York Times* review, one critic noted that “the playful disposition [of the Disney animators] to edit and arrange certain scenes so that it appears the wild life in them is behaving in human and civilized ways” might “afford satisfaction according to individual taste,” but will not please “the studious naturalists.” “For instance,” the critic continues, “there is a most clever and amusing sequence in which two scorpions are shown in the act of courtship as though the whole thing were performed to square-dance calls. The footage is cut, reversed and timed to a jolly square-dance score—all very humorous and beguiling. But it isn’t true to life.”<sup>2</sup>

What is true to life in the desert? The response to this question intimated by *The Living Desert* is more contradictory and manifold than straightforward. Importantly, the film shows that the desert is not an inert place. Rather than empty or uninhabited, as is often assumed, it is full of living dramas. However, in their strong anthropomorphism, the film’s representations of these dramas affirm what the filmmakers constructed instead of what they found. What is more, while the film provides a precise description of the area covered by the desert regions of the western United States, it obscures the fact that most of the scenes more precisely depict species of the Sonoran Desert, following the founding of the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum on the western edge of Tucson, Arizona, a year before the film was made (fig. 0.1). The survival of such species, in turn, does not take place in what the documentary describes as “the eternal desert,” but in particular ecosystems whose living relationships are constantly being calibrated to and by variables ranging from climate to human disruption. In short, the kind of desert “life” depicted in *The Living Desert* is largely fictionalized in geography, temporality, and interspecies relations. Rather than a place in its own right, it is made to serve the whims and wishes of filmmakers seeking to entertain above all else.

If 1953 marked the emergence of a Disney-fied, sentimental characterization of US western deserts in terms of a picturesque natural history, it also signaled a turning point in how those landscapes were represented in narratives of progress and modernity. In the same year that *The Living Desert* was released, footage of nuclear explosions at the Nevada Test Site was made public. Filmed and reported on by journalists such as Walter Cronkite, the footage seen on television showed the now-infamous March 17 test at Yucca Flat in which the US military dropped a sixteen-kiloton bomb named Annie on a fake and uninhabited “village” nicknamed Doom Town. The footage, however, was thought incapable of conveying the full effects of the test (it is blurry, and the field of vision too narrow to fully encompass the spread and power of the blast). That is, the truly “sublime” nature of the bomb’s destruction was not sufficiently evident.<sup>3</sup> An attempt to rectify this was made by Allen H. Miner, who released a docudrama short in 1953 that follows a fictional reporter covering the nuclear test. Titled *Doom Town*, the film was shot in the new technology of 3D and trades on sci-fi B-movie



FIGURE 0.1

Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, Tucson, Arizona. Photograph by Michelle Maria, 2013. Copyright CC BY 3.0.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sonora\\_Desert\\_Museum,\\_Tuscon\\_Arizona\\_-\\_panoramio\\_\(4\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sonora_Desert_Museum,_Tuscon_Arizona_-_panoramio_(4).jpg);

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/legalcode>.



FIGURE 0.2

Allen H. Miner, *Doom Town*, 1953. Image: courtesy US National Archives and Records Administration.

effects (fig. 0.2). Using shocking and spectacular footage of the actual test, it tries to convey apocalyptic terror of unknown scale through visual immersion. Shown in theaters with the horror film *The Maze*, directed by William Cameron Menzies, it served as a lurid counterpoint to both the relentlessly upbeat cadences of Cold War military propaganda and the amusing follies of interspecies interaction assembled in *The Living Desert*. The official dogma from Washington, DC, and the Pentagon was that because nuclear tests were conducted in the empty and worthless wastelands of Nevada, human populations had nothing to fear.<sup>4</sup> *Doom Town* reinscribes this program of devastating tests into a pulp-horror scenario in which the US government, under the cover of Cold War ideology, carries out secret experiments of unimaginable destructive power. The film thus represents the desert as a landscape of fear and poses military technology and nuclear physics as the stuff of nightmares.

Taken together, *The Living Desert* and *Doom Town* compel us to think about the conflicted history and legacy of the desert as *representation*. Historical and rhetorical conceptions of the American West were and are filtered through multiple narratives of progression and regression, economy and aesthetics, ecology and culture. Catrin Gersdorf, one of the few scholars to analyze the desert's imaginative impact on US literature, argues that the image of the West as a vast tabula rasa for unlimited expansion and freedom emerged in the late nineteenth century, and was integral to the

development of American political and cultural identity.<sup>5</sup> But by the late twentieth century deserts had increasingly become sites of mediation between an ideology invested in technology and capitalist exploitation on the one hand, and environmental and ecological challenges to this ideology on the other. *Doom Town* represents the desert as the inevitable landscape of disastrous and unstoppable change. But Disney's nature documentary presents the desert as a fascinating, ecologically diverse landscape of discovery and wonder. These two different but equally powerful fantasies continue to frame the discourse on deserts and desertification in the twenty-first century.

On this point, it is vital to note that the concept of "desert" addressed in this volume is primarily that of the cultural mythos fashioned around semiarid environments in the United States. From the perspective of scientific ecology, the country contains few ecosystems that are actually arid enough to be classified as true deserts. Due to the precipitation created by the "rain shadows" of the Sierra Nevada and Rocky Mountain ranges, the United States contains four semiarid regions that are known as deserts more for their scant plant growth than for their climate.<sup>6</sup> These regions—the Mojave Desert, Great Basin Desert, Sonoran Desert, and Chihuahuan Desert—vary dramatically in such variables as size, elevation, and climate, resulting in equally diverse variations in their plant and animal species. What is more, the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts are not confined to the borders of the United States, and all four are notably smaller in area than the Sahara, Arabian, and Gobi Deserts of North Africa, West Asia, and East Asia, respectively. Just as in the opening sequence of *The Living Desert*, however, the four distinctive environments that comprise the semiarid expanses in the United States have neither been widely understood nor addressed for their differences. Culturally, they have long been conflated as a continuous expanse in deeply ingrained notions of the American desert that are as romanticized as they are monolithic.<sup>7</sup>

The history of this cultural imagining and construction of the desert has taken a number of significant turns during the past two hundred years, which we might trace from Stephen H. Long, who coined the phrase the "Great American Desert" in 1820.<sup>8</sup> This epithet was used to identify all lands west of the Mississippi that were, according to him, "almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence."<sup>9</sup> In Andrew Jackson's view, these were lands suitable only for expendable Indigenous tribes during the Indian removal. This assessment of the desert as wasteland persevered through much of the nineteenth century. It was not until 1901, when Rutgers University art history professor John C. Van Dyke published *The Desert*, that the Southwest's topography was submitted to an aesthetic transformation of land into "landscape." An admirer of John Muir, Van Dyke treated the desert as sublime nature in its most spartan and overwhelming form, initiating a twentieth-century understanding of the American West as an artistically pure space. In the following decades, the Western desert was interpreted through the lens of two related rubrics: its value was determined by how habitable it could be made, and its aesthetic meaning was tied to an American ideology that linked morality

to expansion. Indeed, up through the 1950s, it was a landscape associated with the promise of American modernity. That is, it seemingly offered rich natural resources ripe for exploitation and unlimited land for development, but also the distance and solitude necessary for military secrets.<sup>10</sup> As *The Living Desert* and *Doom Town* make clear, the desert's postwar aestheticization veered between imagining the landscape as both completely empty and miraculously full of life. In many ways, this contrast fit with eighteenth-century Romantic visions of landscape, with the desert made to conform to either the sublime or the picturesque.

By the 1970s, however, Western landscapes came to epitomize the failures of modernity in US culture—increasingly associated with military-industrial debacles, the threat of nuclear waste disposal, corporate ecological disasters, and quixotic attempts at dwelling and development. At this time, members of the growing US environmental movement, driven by the likes of Edward Abbey and his iconic, albeit controversial, *Desert Solitaire* (1968), also attempted to reclaim the desert as a sensitive ecosystem, rejecting its inscription into narratives of growth or progress.<sup>11</sup> Recent scholarship in art history has sought to further probe this turn. In *The Recording Machine: Art and Fact during the Cold War* (2017), Joshua Shannon examines desert spaces as “an ideal analogue (or setting) for modernism's storied preoccupation with formalist autonomy,” addressed by artists ranging from Robert Smithson to Vija Celmins to Nancy Holt.<sup>12</sup> The kind of desert modernism Shannon describes is more narrowly a project of the visual arts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but its repercussions might be read across the many modernist fantasies (architectural, literary, military, et cetera) carried out to destructive effect upon the environments and inhabitants of the western United States.

This latter framework has been addressed by Emily Eliza Scott, one of the contributors to this volume, in her essay “Desert Ends,” published in the 2012 exhibition catalogue *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*, which considers the importance of the desert, and especially the dry lakebeds of California and Nevada, as stages for cultural transition. In March 1962, the European artist Jean Tinguely set up a junk machine for the sole purpose of destroying itself: *Study for an End of the World, No. 2* (fig. 0.3). In July 1968, Smithson, Holt, and Michael Heizer would drive out to the same place—with, apparently, no knowledge of Tinguely's presence on the site six years earlier—to carve into and collect dirt, and in doing so, imagine that “stak[ing] out new artistic territory” like pioneers would open a new era of culture.<sup>13</sup> But as Scott shows, such imaginings of closure and regeneration in the desert were part and parcel of the disruptive, extractive, and exploitative versions of modernism that these artists were seemingly seeking to dispel.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the troubling contradictions and problematic history of desert modernism would increasingly be defined through the ellipses, slippages, and bricolage of postmodern theory. In this next significant era of cultural production about the desert, European theorists such as Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard