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# The topography of "the garden of the world": From American nature and national myth-making to the Hollywood musical as a medium of representation

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**Abstract**

The article discusses the idea of America as "the garden of the world" and traces the evolution of nature representations – landscapes, parks, gardens – in its history, combining studies of nature, myth-making, and visual culture. The key assumption is to demonstrate that nature was consistently presented within the framework of the *locus amoenus* topos and that in nation- and culture-forming processes, it served less as a mere physical setting than as a medium for negotiating identity, American mythology, and escapist longings. Research focuses on the persistence of these dynamics, tracing trajectories from the colonial era through romantic and transcendental approaches to the rise of cinema, culminating in selected examples of film musicals from the Great Depression era that serve as illustrative cases.

**Keywords**

American culture, myth-making, nature / *locus amoenus*, musical film, utopia, escapism

**Topografia „ogrodu świata”:**
**Amerykańska przyroda, narodowe mitotwórstwo**
**i hollywoodzki musical jako medium reprezentacji**

**Abstrakt**

Niniejszy artykuł porusza problematykę mitu Ameryki jako “ogrodu świata” i kreśli tropy ewolucji przedstawień natury – krajobrazów, parków, ogrodów i tym podobnych – w jej dziejach łącząc studia nad naturą, mitotwórstwo i kulturę wizualną.

Kluczowym założeniem jest wykazanie, że natura była często ujmowana w ramach toposu *locus amoenus*, i że w procesach narodowo- oraz kulturotwórczych pełniła rolę nie tylko realnych krajobrazów, ale także medium służącego budowaniu nie tylko narodowej tożsamości, ale także mitów, a w momentach przełomowych – eskapistycznych wyobrażeń. Przedstawia ciągłość owych przemian począwszy od epoki kolonialnej przez ujęcia romantyczne i transcendentalne, po rozwój kinematografii, za studium przypadku obierając wybrane przykłady musicali filmowych doby Wielkiego Kryzysu.

**Słowa kluczowe**

kultura amerykańska, mitotwórstwo, natura/*locus amoenus*, musical filmowy, utopia, eskapizm

“Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us.”
~ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* 1836

## 1. A promised land: Nature in the birth of American culture

From the very beginning of American culture, motifs such as nature, gardens and the classical topos of the *locus amoenus* have been embedded in various types of art. From colonial visions of the New World as a new Eden, through the transcendentalist valorization of nature in the 19th century, the pastoral

landscapes of painters and poets negotiating the tensions of industrial modernity, to early twentieth century evolution from a romantic utopia to a symbol of lost innocence reflecting the growing anxiety and complexity of modern society, to a place of solitude and escape, a dynamic backdrop for the quest for authenticity and freedom. In each of these contexts, themes of gardens, nature, and the topos of a "pleasant place" in a wide sense have functioned at various levels and dimensions, being one of the major topics in American art. Therefore, nature has had a long-standing impact on the culture-forming processes of this country.

As noted by Lawrence Buell, it all began with Columbus, in whose *Diario* "the locus amoenus of classical literature congeals into an empirical region" – a departure from prior European travel writing, wherein "paradisiacal landscape is a legendary phantasm, but not an actual locus given for description" (1995: 449). His writings, especially the journal of his first voyage, often "regarded by literary scholars as the holotype underpinning the modern genre of travel writing" (Pisarek and Orzeł 2024: 43), described the newly discovered islands using expressions and associations reminiscent of the historical *locus amoenus* – a well-known literary topos defined by Ernst Robert Curtius. Originating in ancient Greek and Roman texts, it is often described as a garden or a landscape, an idyllic location of Arcadian origin full of sunny meadows, flowers, shade and a sense of security; a delightful place, filled with birdsong, pleasant and friendly to humans; a space of harmony filled with symbolism. According to Ning Chen, the American discoverer's papers were "full of praise for the beauty of natural scenery" (2017: 623). While on his exploration journey to the New World, Columbus wrote:

> If the others already seen are very beautiful, green, and fertile, this is much more so, with large trees and very green. Here there are large lagoons with wonderful vegetation on their banks. Throughout the island all is green, and the herbage like April in

> Andalusia. The songs of the birds were so pleasant that it seemed as if a man could never wish to leave the place […] There are trees of a thousand sorts, and all have their several fruits; and I feel the most unhappy man in the world not to know them, for I am well assured that they are all valuable (October 21, 1492).

Perceived largely from the perspective of admiring these natural landscapes and enjoying them for their aesthetic worth and delightful experience, Columbus' narrative strategy paints an image of a remote, isolated, and attractive world that defies convention. These were the first steps toward comprehending and seeing America as a "new world" a "new land", a place of metaphorical solace and rejuvenation.[1]

During the early period of settlement, particularly in the accounts of travelers and conquistadors, the contrast between the New World and Europe was a recurring motif. Whereas Europe was often marked by overpopulation and continual warfare, America was described by some settlers as a "paradise" where newcomers could do nothing but enjoy the benefits of the local environment. Yet, compared to Europe, the New World remained largely a wilderness, untamed and unfamiliar. For those willing to undertake the journey, however, it promised the prospect of a better future.

One of the ways the idea was spread during colonial times was through cartography and iconography, which emerged back then and most commonly took the form of illustrations in travel books, richly decorated with rivers, flowers, lush greenery etc. For instance, in 1616 John Smith produced the first accurate

[1] For the sake of historical perspective, I consider it crucial to emphasize the fundamental cultural and historical determinants. Indeed, the idealized vision that developed over the centuries used paradisiacal nomenclature, but such "paradise" was mainly accessible to colonizers and settlers, while the myth-making process took place at the expense of dispossessing Native Americans of their lands and exploiting black slaves. It is a fact that the powerful myth that America was a promised land, where nature was bountiful and life was idyllic developed. Nevertheless, one must not forget the violence and injustice that were an absolutely shameful but integral part of the colonization process.

map of the New England coast. "The most noteworthy thing in Smith's *Description* is his communication of wonder at the vastness of this continent and its immense possibilities" (Abel 2002: 9).

Nature was treated somewhat differently in Puritan literature, where it was linked to God's plans. For example, the theory of America as "New Jerusalem", presented by representatives of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, or in John Winthrop's 1630 sermon entitled *A Model of Christian Charity*, describes the country as a place of spiritual renewal. It is a *locus amoenus* imbued with the idea of *terra nova*, a nation-building space in religious and moral renewal surrounded by nature. Therefore, early colonial narratives blend the real environment of the New World, which was seen as land that needed to be exploited, with the symbolic "pleasant place" as God's garden.

Over time, virgin lands were increasingly transformed into spaces of "culture" and "progress". Nature began to serve practical and economic functions through agriculture and animal husbandry. Progressive industrial, urban, and intellectual growth was the outcome of the drive for progress and construction of a new sociocultural reality. America drew in large numbers of immigrants, but Romantic thinkers resisted the classicist movement's attempts to hierarchize man's interactions with wildlife and the natural world. There are two paths of development. Representatives of 19th-century philosophical and artistic trends maintain that the connection between man and nature means turning toward pantheism and providing a sense of moral awakening. Landscape painters often suggest this romantic connection by placing human figures alone in a vast landscape, which became a source of national pride and the main feature of a unique American identity. Paintings were created to depict the new continent as a mythological land, and nature was viewed as a sublime and divine creation. Therefore, the Edenic image of America gave it the status of a promised land. At the same time, with advancing industrialization and population growth, not only did the democratization of nature begin (which

was closely related to the expansion of urban and national parks), but nature was also treated as a private space with escapist potential.

## 2. The sublimation of nature in 19th-century American art and philosophy

The American art movement known as the Hudson River School (1825–1870) emerged during this period. The term characterizes a group of landscape artists, portraying the natural beauty of the Hudson River Valley and, later, the American West. After studying in Europe and returning home, these artists turned to American themes, driven by a surge of nationalism and a desire to counter European critics who claimed that their homeland lacked a distinct culture. In their oil paintings, they celebrated nature as a source of spiritual renewal, focusing intensely on the New York landscape in an effort to preserve it from destruction by the axe (Hamilton and Jones 2014: 13). Some of its most famous artists were Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, Albert Bierstadt, and Frederic Edwin Church. The movement's creative goals and wider ideological background are made clear by a number of essential traits: their works primarily depict the American wilderness, sublime and picturesque; to elicit spiritual and emotional reactions, light and atmosphere were meticulously portrayed in scenes such as sunrise, sunset, moonlight, or mist; detailed renderings of natural elements such as rocks, trees, water, vegetation, and skies not only affirmed the distinctiveness of the North American landscape but also functioned as allegorical vehicles, conveying ideals of purity, freedom, and the frontier's promise.

"The spectacle of natural landscape as the hallmark of America's authenticity and power was given vivid depiction in the work of the early nineteenth-century painter Thomas Cole" (Marantz Cohen 2001: 73). One of his most famous paintings, entitled *The Falls of Kaaterskill* (1826), depicts a waterfall in the Catskill Mountains in New York State and combines the

monumentality of nature with an atmosphere of mystery and sublimity. We can see a double-tiered waterfall amidst dense and wild forest, rocks, and cliffs. The composition draws the viewer's attention away from the gleaming water tumbling down the falls and toward the rocky landscape below. This dramatic effect is increased by Cole's use of light and shadow, creating a contrast between the bright upper part of the painting and the lower part shrouded in the shadow, which suggests mystery. Moreover, Michael Gaudio (2010: 457) offered an interesting interpretation, claiming that "the entrance of the cataract disrupts the view and initiates a shift into an aural experience of nature". *The Falls of Kaaterskill* can be interpreted specifically in terms of significance and symbolism; the waterfall as a site of reflection and spiritual experience refers to nature as a source of sanctity. The landscape's grandeur and majesty demonstrate America's distinct identity, with the natural world serving as both its wealth and foundation.

Thomas Cole's most gifted student, Frederic Church, created a painting that is regarded as one of the most famous works in the history of the Hudson River School: *Niagara* (1857), a monumental canvas more than 2.5 meters wide. The painting represents Niagara Falls as both a national symbol and a natural spectacle that evokes awe and apprehension – a waterfall that evokes both admiration and anxiety – nowadays widely recognized as one of the most identifiable elements of the American landscape. Because of its majestic scale and romantic aura, the painting has been recreated as a public spectacle, engaging audiences for decades.

The composition of *Niagara* is "controlled by a strong but simple geometry" and "the rectangular form of the canvas echoes in the long-band sky. The straight edge of the horizon line divides the image horizontally" (Raab 2015: 21). It feels as if the viewer is standing on the very edge of the waterfall, and the fact that Church has faithfully captured the rapid flow of the water makes it seem as if one is about to fall into the abyss. "The sense of choppy, deeper water near the bottom edge is created by

rounded, dark green strokes while little ragged crescents of bright white give form to the more turbulent portions" (Raab 2015: 21). Fog rises above the precipice, and the light is quite dramatic. Furthermore, the whirling water foam and falling streams create the illusion similar to the one mentioned by Gaudio in the context of Cole's work – that we can nearly "hear" the splash of the waterfall. Once again, we are confronted with the concept of nature's sublimity and the assumption that in its face, man is powerless. Therefore, like other Hudson River School artists, Church created a manifesto of national pride, immersing the viewer in an almost bodily engagement with the natural world.

Transcendentalism was a 19th-century philosophical and literary movement based on intuition as the only way to understand reality in a world where nature is the embodiment of spiritual truth, a space for rebirth, self-discovery, and moral ideals. It also emphasizes the equity, importance and equality of the individual, highlighting the innate goodness of man and nature, of which he is a part. An idealized place in nature (meadow, grove, stream) was for transcendentalists not only an escape from the technocratic world but also a place where man could find his true nature.

The main figure and father of the transcendental movement was Ralph Waldo Emerson. His poem *Nature* (1836) emphasizes the unity of all nature manifestations – its symbolism, and the constant development of all its forms. He believes that nature, in all its beauty and splendor, serves a higher purpose for mankind and is a source of spiritual unity with the "Universal Being" – a form of sacredness of the *locus amoenus*.

> The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the

> animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood (Bode 1946: 32)

Published in 1854, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* is a collection of eighteen philosophical texts written by Henry David Thoreau during his experiment of living alone near Walden Pond from July 4, 1845, to September 6, 1847, in a house he constructed himself on Ralph Waldo Emerson's land. It is a social criticism of Western civilization, with its consumerism and disregard for environmental harm. Its goal is to encourage readers, especially those living in growing large urban centers, to critically examine their way of life and thinking. Perhaps one of the most popular quotes from this work is as follows: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (Cafaro 2010: 18).

At a time of rapid industrial development and the popularization of city life, the author argued that isolation was an idyllic experience, and that human fulfillment should not be sought in the hustle and bustle or materialism of city life. In *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, American society, against industrialization, returns to the bosom of wild nature.

## 3. Between reality and leisure: The democratization of nature in the Gilded Age

Following the Civil War (1861–1865), the impact of industrialization was more apparent in the increasing destruction of the landscape than in its advantages. The period known in American history as the Gilded Age saw the construction of transcontinental railroads, urbanization of the populace, creation of enormous fortunes, and growth of social stratification.

> Many American cities doubled their populations; millions of South and East European immigrants brought their unfamiliar lan-

> guages, religious institutions and cultural customs to create diversity such as the nation had never seen before; long parallel lines of horsecar and streetcar tracks pushed out from the city centers to the open land where residential suburbs began to grow (Sklar 1994: 3).

Entertainment, newspaper circulation, transportation, the manufacturing and distribution of goods are all examples of how mass production has infiltrated daily life. Due to the rapid urbanization of the era, an increasing number of people lived and worked in frequently challenging circumstances, far from picturesque settings and the natural world. Therefore, as industrialization took off the idyllic vision of landscape, the embodiment of *locus amoenus*, became a powerful tool of escapism.

The expression "back to nature" needs to be interpreted on two levels, in order to comprehend this aspect. First, in the actual sense of physically fleeing or moving to a different location that provides a break from one's existing residence. Second, in a mental and psychological meaning, which is most frequently observed in literature (both high and low), entertainment and the performing arts.

The way the natural environment was understood changed significantly in the second half of the 1800s. It moved beyond just practical uses to moral, spiritual, artistic, and social aspects. Americans realized that the country's natural resources were limited as a result of its subsequent exploitation. This led to the creation of national parks. In 1872, Yellowstone National Park was reserved by an act of Congress as a public "pleasuring ground". The statute that declared that significant event stated:

> [The Yellowstone region] is hereby reserved and withdrawn from settlement occupancy or sale … and set apart as a public park of pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people… [The secretary of the interior] shall provide for the preservation … of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park… in their natural condition (Jensen and Guthrie 2006: 23).

Other ideas – of public parks as urban "controlled idylls" – developed even earlier before the outbreak of the Civil War. In 1839, in Chicago, a site for outdoor recreation was designed near Fort Dearborn, "and in 1850 Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux designed Central Park as a place where New Yorkers could escape the tensions of city life through relaxation and exercise" (Jensen and Guthrie 2006: 25). It was an intentional endeavor of a "democratic locus amoenus" – a place where people from all walks of life could unwind after a long day in the city. Olmsted stressed that the park ought to be "the lungs of the city" and a place that influences community and civic engagement.

The same applies to the construction of private gardens at the homes of the wealthy elite, which is inextricably linked to the idea of the "American Dream". This kind of "earthly paradise" evolved to represent a normal home with a garden, white picket fence, and secure neighborhood. The suburbs were meant to provide a peaceful family life, a haven from the bustle of the urban area, and a perfect setting for raising children. The democratization process advanced to such an extent that it resulted in the printing of gardening guides in newspapers. In the 20th century, this way of living was frequently romanticized in advertisements, movies, and television shows, which portrayed the suburbs as enclaves of happiness.

During the Gilded Age, opportunities for relaxation gradually increased, including in various forms of activity. As tourism and leisure culture grew, seaside, mountain, and spa resorts were built and marketed as perfect locations for the renewal of the body and soul. Other commercialized and non-commercialized forms of interest began to occur, such as picnicking, hiking, and biking, as well as the earliest outdoor camps, which served as a model for contemporary camping, particularly for tourists and outdoor enthusiasts.

In the realm of artistic practice, the theme of idyllic nature was found in simple popular literature, such as Susan Coolidge's 1873 novel *What Katy Did at School* and later volumes in

her series, or Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), as well as in calendars, fairy tales, illustrations, almanacs and magazines like *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. According to Paula Marantz-Cohen (2001:78), an attempt "to represent landscape as a vital reality" was discernible in "the theatre, where efforts were made to produce extravagantly natural-looking sets". Audiences were shown massive, "paradisiacal" views of waterfalls, valleys, and plains through painted moving panoramas, cycloramas, and dioramas (traveling visual spectacles), which are typically used for melodramas. These were well-liked plays based on nature storytelling (using charming landscapes, picturesque valleys of the countryside, weather phenomena, etc.), as well as sociopolitical strife and character polarization. A work that stands out in this context is Denman Thompson's *The Old Homestead* – a story that captures the heart of rural 19th-century America. The main character, Joshua Whitcomb, wants to find his son who left New York in pursuit of his dreams. The scenes set in the countryside are full of pastoral images, and the dialogues often mention the beauty of nature, farm work, and the values associated with it, while the farm is presented as an ideal, lost Eden, to which a return symbolizes the restoration of morality and happiness.

In addition to its aesthetic value, nature serves as a symbolic location for national myth-making and remembrance in melodramas. In a moral and political sense, landscapes are associated with a particular region or location. The classic poem *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1847), which was staged by Edward Rice and John Braham (1874), is a very intriguing example of such an approach. It tells the tragic story of Evangeline and Gabriel's love and their lifelong quest for one another as well as the deportation of the Acadians from Nova Scotia in 1755. Acadia or the "Land of Evangeline", from which the titular heroine and other residents are expelled, is described as a "fruitful valley", "pleasant farms" with meadows and bird sounds. The poem has a symbolic meaning because it contrasts Acadia's tranquillity with the violent nature

of exile. The moral and serious tone of its literary precursor was changed by the musical extravaganza that Rice and Braham interpreted as a theatrical rendition, favoring an engaging plot with an enticing, parodic character. There were numerous dancing breaks, risqué jokes, stage magic, and striking lighting effects throughout the performances. Additionally, digitalized descriptions, posters, and images that are currently available online indicate the spectacle's popularity. The decorative presentation of Acadia as a colorful, rich, picturesque setting, along with dance sequences among meadows and gardens, changed the tone of the story from a vehicle for historical memory to a visual attraction for entertainment. Both versions of *Evangeline* functioned equally well in the American repertoire and both had their justification. While the original focused on the dramatic layer, emphasizing the importance of morality and building a national myth, the theatrical interpretation was an aesthetic response to the needs of the entertainment market.

Other popular stage forms, such as burlesques, also fit into this trend, in which greenery was an important component as a backdrop for jokes, flirting, comic and erotic scenes, functioning as a "scenic postcard". It was an ornament and an impressive scene designed to attract the audience's attention without necessarily focusing on deeper meanings and symbolism.

Musical comedies, a key part of American culture, became popular on Broadway in the early 1900s. Especially during the Roaring Twenties, in performances dominated by music, dance and song, the "paradise of America" functioned as an element of capitalist spectacle, constructed as an entertainment commodity. Advertising for American land was identified with the development of tourism and resorts as well as the investment boom in California, Las Vegas, New York, and Florida. A prime example of this is *The Cocoanuts*, directed by Oscar Eagle with music and lyrics by Irving Berlin and book by George S. Kaufman. It was written for the Marx Brothers and cast Groucho as a Florida hotel-owner who ran it in the 1920s Florida land boom assisted by Chico, Harpo, and Zeppo. With hilarious twists and turns,

the story unfolds in the really paradisiacal setting of a luxury resort, among palm trees, beaches, and blue skies – a space of pleasure and "easy living". The main narrative revolves around an attempt to defraud rich tourists by selling them pieces of land. With the Marx Brothers in the starring parts, we are dealing with a parody in which Florida serves as a backdrop for farce and turmoil. Instead of serving a moral and symbolic function, the combination of the region's exotic nature and commercialization works solely as amusement and advertising. The American landscape is portrayed as a sort of "locus economicus" – a location of consumption rather than a place of spiritual rejuvenation. It is worth emphasizing that the 1925 Broadway debut of *The Cocoanuts* was so successful that Paramount Studios made it the Marx Brothers' debut motion picture in 1929.

As society was looking for new narrative forms around the turn of the century, cinema emerged as a medium that could portray nature in a completely new way. Although the landscapes in movies were initially primarily products of set design and decoration, new visual technology made it possible to edit artwork in ways that were not feasible in theaters. Cinema's dynamic editing and sense of movement allowed it to construct its own stories about nature, which would eventually take over viewers' imaginations.

## 4. American musical film as a medium of representation – case studies

Filmmakers used landscapes to create a sense of national identity during Hollywood's silent period. Nature has been shown in a variety of ways across different genres such as comedies, melodramas, westerns or horrors, usually as an active character – a place for spiritual peace and catharsis. As Rick Altman (1987: 131) puts it, "when the film first learned to speak, it sang instead". The sound revolution of 1927 resulted in the creation of a new film genre – the musical. In fact, Stephen Neale (2000: 100) highlights that throughout the studio era "most of the

major and minor companies made musicals". Additionally, Barrios (1995: 3) notes:

> Some of film's most extravagant stakes on its audience's attention has come with its musicals. Despite the many distinguished specimens made abroad, musical film is a peculiarly American concept, alternately loved and derided. For many years musicals had – the past tense need apply – a remarkable propensity for fulfilling wishes and making fantasies seem reasonable. Innocence and cynicism, decorum and ebullience seem to meet at the point where some quintessential images are forged – Astaire and Rogers dancing cheek to cheek, Garland on the trolley, Kelly in the rain, Monroe and her diamonds. For all their putative triviality and the disrespect paid to them by some elitists, musicals create unexpectedly powerful impressions.

Through storytelling, dance, singing, elaborate sets, and a spectacular atmosphere, musicals create a space where viewers can forget their everyday troubles. According to Dyer (2002: 20), it has a utopian character; it "offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives do not provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia [...]" although it "does not present models of utopian worlds, as in the classic utopias of Thomas More, William Morris, et. al". According to the researcher, musicals are part of the entertainment industry and fulfill the need for community, emotional transparency and class harmony, even if they do so temporarily and symbolically. In this sense, musicals are a modern myth-creating ritual. This is due to its affective structure – rhythm, color, and the relationship of bodies in dance and space – where desire for another harmonious world finds its visual and symbolic roots.

The choice of this particular film genre as a case study is therefore particularly justified, because, as a cultural text, it has taken on a similar function in the field to that attributed to nature and landscapes – escapism, a conventional *locus amoenus*, a space for (at least temporary) respite. Moreover, the moment

of its historical development constituted a different level of meaning. In the history of theater and film musicals, it has been commonly observed that great musicals typically emerge in eras of anxiety and upheaval. Paradoxically, the beginnings of the musical as a film genre and its enormous popularity among American audiences coincided with the Great Depression, which ravaged the country in the 1930s. "It ran from 1929 to 1939, and saw the stock market crash; wiped out many investors; felled companies which then laid off workers who then spent less; which in turn decreased demand and output… all in a dizzying tailspin of seemingly inescapable decline" (Holborn 2017: 9). Film musicals became a key cultural element that helped people survive difficult times, symbolizing an unyielding spirit of optimism and perseverance. As David Luhrssen (2022: IX–X) notes:

> Although the period's history has been documented, written, and rewritten from many perspectives, no medium has the power to stamp a uniform impression on the imagination of large numbers of people like film […]. Along with radio, movies were the most pervasive form of entertainment during the Great Depression and the word "entertainment" suggests that audiences sought diversion in the cinema.

At the height of the Great Depression in 1933, Warner Bros. produced a series of backstage musicals co-created by Busby Berkeley. Shirley Temple signed a contract with Fox Film Corporation to appear in the film S*tand Up and Cheer!*, which proved to be a watershed moment in her career. RKO produced the musical *Flying Down to Rio*, in which Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers appeared on screen for the first time as a dance duo in *Carioca*, electrifying "the screen with their infectious, everyman appeal and undeniable chemistry" (Holborn 2017: 36). A string of successful film partnerships followed, and nine musicals were produced by RKO Radio Pictures between 1933 and 1939 starring this iconic duet.

This entire series can be classified under the "fairy tale musicals" category (Altman 1989) – romantic stories about dreams coming true, sometimes even featuring exotic elements or foreign plot twists. The Astaire-Rogers series presents a specific type of film aesthetics, where the emphasis is placed on an idyllic, wonderful world of luxury, exoticism and an imposing environment, in which dance brings the couple together. The loving couple most often uses song and dance to convey their love in films' diegetic layer, which is made up of a variety of picturesque settings, such as manicured gardens, parks, terraces, and vacation places. For example, in *Top Hat* (1935, dir. Mark Sandrich), the dance scenes take place in a romantic park gazebo, a hotel atrium filled with magnificent plants, and on a terrace resembling a Mediterranean garden in the *Cheek to Cheek* scene; in *The Gay Divorcee* (1934, dir. Mark Sandrich), the backdrop for the story is the seaside, a holiday setting, and "enclosed hotel gardens" such as an atrium, terrace, and veranda; in *Swing Time* (1936, dir. George Stevens), the song *A Fine Romance* is performed in a snowy natural setting.

Astaire-Rogers musical world represents beauty and harmony, which constantly triumph, hence demonstrating the concept of a "pleasant place". Considering the above, it is justified to interpret it through the prism of Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, described in *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* (1967) as a "world within a world", a space that reveals tensions within society, both similar to their surroundings and contrasting with them. This is exactly the role musical depictions of nature serve in this case. These idyllic settings are distinct areas, structured in a unique manner. First of all, because the song-and-dance moments are set there; they stand in contrast to the rest of the story that is recounted in the musical. Second, they are locations where interactions between Astaire and Rogers characters are unrestricted by social and economic factors, thus representing what is inaccessible in the depression-era reality – harmony, peace, abundance.

For this reason, the RKO Astaire-Rogers film series can be seen as a continuation of a longstanding American tradition in which the greenery serves as both a cultural metaphor and an aesthetic strategy for negotiating historical turmoil. The audience, watching these luxurious gardens, terraces, gazebos, and well-kept parks, experienced a momentary escape into a world which, although fictional, gave them a sense of closeness to something better.

The year 1939 marks the symbolic end of the Great Depression, symbolic because its effects were still being felt, even though the process of reversing them had begun. The catalyst for these changes was the smoldering war in Europe, which the United States eventually joined. The sudden demand for weapons and other military goods, followed by mass production during World War II, spurred industrial growth and reduced unemployment. The year 1939 was also a historic moment in the history of film musicals, as it saw the premiere of Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz*.

This story is based on a fairy tale written by L. Frank Baum. A girl named Dorothy, in the MGM production played by Judy Garland, is swept away by a tornado that passes over her hometown in Kansas. Together with her dog Toto, Dorothy travels to the fantastical land of Oz, located "somewhere over the rainbow". She decides to go to the Emerald City, the capital of Oz, to find its powerful wizard and ask for help in returning home. During her journey, the girl meets new friends – the Tin Woodman, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion – and they all join Dorothy and Toto. Her new companions also want to meet the wizard and ask him to grant their wishes: the Tin Woodman wants a real heart, the Cowardly Lion wants courage, and the Scarecrow wants wisdom. However, the Wicked Witch tries to thwart Dorothy and her friends' plans.

Oz is a dreamy place. Dorothy sings about it at the beginning of the film in a song entitled *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* (lyrics by Yip Harburg).

Somewhere over the rainbow
Way up high
And the dreams that you dream of
Once in a lullaby

Somewhere over the rainbow
Way up high
And the dreams that you dream of
Once in a lullaby

Somewhere over the rainbow
Bluebirds fly
And the dreams that you dream of
Dreams really do come true

[…]
Somewhere over the rainbow
Bluebirds fly
Birds fly over the rainbow
Why, oh, why cannot I?

When Dorothy opens the door of her house after the tornado passes, she sees a beautiful, green landscape full of flowers and sunshine. Although the space is inhabited by fantastical creatures such as gnomes, fairies, and witches, the associations with a "delightful place" are explicit. Oz resembles a large, fabulous garden of almost Arcadian origin – full of wonders, beauty, and a sense of community. Open forests and spaces, meadows, and hills bring to mind Eden – a land of happiness and safety. Surrounded by nature and fairy-tale views, Dorothy and her companions undergo an inner transformation, and their journey is complete. When they arrive at the Emerald City and the great Wizard of Oz turns out to be a fraud, they realise that what they had been looking for all along was just at their fingertips – within themselves. After all, each of them is capable and has the potential to love (like the Woodman), be guided by reason (the Scarecrow), care for others (Dorothy), and be wisely courageous (the Lion).

Again, in terms of Altman's theory, *The Wizard of Oz* is literally and metaphorically an example of a fairy-tale musical. It combines fantastical elements with an ostentatious aestheticization of the depicted world, focusing on the representation of nature and landscapes. After years of turmoil, Americans craved home and peace, which Dorothy's journey aims to provide. She travels through an almost mythical space filled with forests, gardens, flowers, and meadows, only to eventually return to Kansas. Therefore, the crucial factor to be considered here is the relationship between attitude toward nature and attitude toward home. David Sopher (1979) notes the problematic aspect of the word "home" itself. The concept evokes many different feelings, such as safety, coziness, orderliness, and acceptance. It may refer to a building, a piece of land, a town, a city, a region, a nation, or even a planet, depending on the context of its use. *The Wizard of Oz* represents the long visual tradition of combining the American landscape with American mythmaking, as Dorothy finally comes back home. Particularly from the Great Depression's perspective, this should be interpreted as a component of national iconography, a shared collection of concepts that serve as a focal point of American imagination and collective identity. It is a perfect realization of an escapist utopia based on paradox. The idea of a "pleasant place" located "somewhere over the rainbow" eventually leads to the integration of dreams and reality, which viewers may interpret as a significant subliminal message. *The Wizard of Oz* serves as an illustration of a journey to self-discovery, which treats a turn towards an idyllic landscape as a kind of escape that brings you home.

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