

CHAPTER 6

Unruly Landscapes

Contested Desert Imaginaries in Post-Franco Spain

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Departing from Granada in a southeasterly direction, the A-92 that winds through the foothills of the Sierra Nevada begins to descend. Gradually, the pine and oak forests become thinly spread and make way for shrubs and grasses. The grey, solid granite turns to pale and crumbly limestone. The view extends in every direction as the hills flatten and vegetation becomes increasingly sparse. The landscape takes on craggy, eroded shapes. These are the arid landscapes of Almería, an Andalusian province in the southeast of Spain, also dubbed “the desert of Europe.” Located in the eastern shadows of the Sierra Nevada mountains, the region is characterized by extremely low and irregular rainfall, averaging between 200 and 300 mm per year, concentrated in torrential rains that can spike up to 90 mm on a single day (AEMET 2019). Moving further into this desert landscape, every now and then whitewashed villages pass by. Some buildings are worn down and collapsed, abandoned by their inhabitants recently or decades ago. Then, turning a corner, the eye adjusts to the simmering reflection of the Mediterranean sun upon plastic sheets that extend to the coastline tens of kilometers away. In thousands of greenhouses, fruits and vegetables grow for Spanish and European markets.

This arid landscape shows paradoxical signs of desolation and development. On one hand, ruins of farms, villages, and industries draw scars in the landscape. On the other hand, the desert has been converted, subdued it seems, into landscapes centered on capitalist extraction through greenhouses, olive plantations, and quarries. Trucks of all types and sizes, carrying tomatoes, gravel, and plastics can be seen passing by shanty houses and workers on bicycles, and the regulars of a village bar may

be heard discussing the latest controversies over intensive irrigation in a place where water is scarce. How do these modes of existence come to coincide in one place? How, if at all, do they relate? And what ideological underpinnings do these landscapes conceal?

In this chapter, I explore the contested landscape imaginaries at play in this arid corner of Spain. My focus in exploring the landscape's sentience, then, lies in the stories it inspires through its materiality and its various transformations—stories that seek to explain this landscape and that (re)produce it in doing so—and in the persistence of these stories over time and through developmental interventions. I take an interdisciplinary approach, bridging the environmental humanities and anthropology, and juxtaposing analyses of representations of the landscape in popular films and TV series with ethnographic material collected in the region between 2016 and 2019. By discussing the landscape's harsh imagery, its fascist legacies, and its various contemporary forms of capitalist exploitation, I show that the landscape has collected a range of violent images that are a significant burden to farmers living and working in the region. These farmers are implicated in this imaginary and are protagonists of the material practices that give substance to its proliferation. At the same time, they are the ones who have historically struggled to improve life for themselves and their workers, who continue to do so, and who are eager to present a different image. It appears, however, that they are struggling against the landscape itself—a landscape that is persistently antagonistic to the various attempts to bring it in line.

In this discussion, I view the (un)making of landscape as a project of both representation and physical engagement. I draw on new materialist approaches, understanding materiality as the conjuncture of the social, the discursive, and the material without presuming dominance of one over the other, so that the landscape “is made up of matter *and* meaning” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012: 91; see also Knappett 2007). Imagination, then, is not just cognitive: it is culturally shared and embedded in symbols, objects, and environments, while material engagement is always discursive and infused with cultural images. This implies that “practice and representation are intrinsically intertwined in the construction of the landscape” (Benson 2010: 64). New meanings can emerge from new material forms, and new forms can emerge from altered meanings. In this way, making and unmaking landscape is something humans do all the time—it is about making sense of the environment, telling and retelling its stories, and redefining its forms. Throughout this chapter, I show how different imaginaries have been developed and challenged, as part and parcel of the “lines of becoming” (Ingold 2011) of people and landscape. The

landscape is always changing, co-constituting, growing; it is “continually coming into being and never complete” (Ingold 2020: 585), though not as an idyll, but as a site of friction. In its perpetual process, landscape justifies particular modes of action and intervention, or the absence of these. It creates, but also confines, possibilities for design activities, shaping the ways in which people experience and physically alter it. The landscape, then, is not just subject to politics, but intrinsically political.

The desert provides a particular but also exemplary case to explore the unruly becoming of landscape. Deserts have taken a complex and problematic position in western cultural and environmental history. On one level, the desert has biblical connotations and is associated with divine presence and spiritual connection, coupled with a view of its extreme climate conditions as divine ordeal or punishment (Davis 2016; Gersdorf 2009; Lane 1998). On another, the desert has an uneasy place in the narrative of European expansion into the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Australia. Due to environmental determinist views, desert landscapes long served to confirm the otherness and backwardness of these regions while posing Europe as the center of civilization and modernity (Davis 2016; Gersdorf 2009). The desert gained connotations of unproductive, degraded land, unfit for human habitation and mismanaged by native populations (Davis 2016). Such tropes spurred efforts to convert desert landscapes into productive, cultivated terrains. Here, too, biblical notions of Eden and of garden versus barren wilderness have played a role, often at the cost of native pastoral livelihoods. Nowadays, this rings true for example in the various “reforestation” projects that are implemented even in regions that never were forests. As such, “desert landscapes have been and are increasingly subject to global efforts to increase food production through agricultural expansion into arid lands” (Davis 2016: 8). The UN- and African Union-backed “Great Green Wall” project, which is supposed to surround the Sahara with a belt of vegetation with the aim of producing agricultural landscapes, is a case in point, as is the expansion of center pivot irrigation in Saudi Arabia since the early 1990s. The Almerian desert, which is the focal point of this chapter, with its thousands of greenhouses and superintensive olive plantations, testifies to this view of desert landscapes as being in “need” of transformation—as well as to its tendency to resist being tamed. Rather than simply reiterating these imaginaries, my aim is to analyze them as they appear in public debates and films produced in the region, to show how they seem to have become engrained in the landscape, and how they have been contested. My starting point for this is the prominence of cinematic representations of the Almerian landscape.

Desert Imaginaries in Spaghetti Westerns

With its steep, eroded hillsides and deep, dry riverbeds, it is no wonder that the spectacular Almerian landscapes have attracted not only geologists interested in rock formation but also filmmakers looking for settings for their work. The movie industry in Almería began in the 1950s but expanded exponentially in the early 1960s with the emergence of the “spaghetti western” genre, an umbrella term for European westerns (Hughes 2004). Though film experts tend to agree that most of the more than five hundred spaghetti westerns made by the late 1970s can be considered pulp (Hughes 2010), some *did* become successful and have gone on to gain legendary status, notably Sergio Leone’s Dollars trilogy, to which I will limit my discussion in this section. The trilogy comprises the films *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966). These films have played a catalyzing role in the Almerian film industry and are famous for their emblematic photographic portrayal of the desert landscapes of Almería. What binds the three films is not the narrative but the setting, and the imagined world this setting represents. The films share a set of archetypal characters often played by the same actors. In particular, the reappearance of Clint Eastwood in his signature outfit (poncho, hat, and cigar) became a leitmotif in the three films.

In *For a Few Dollars More*, Eastwood’s nameless character rides into town on a mule, passing a group of tobacco-spitting men in cowboy attire. They jeer at the traveler, ridicule his looks, and fire their pistols at the mule’s feet, scaring it and causing it to run away. The traveler jumps off, recomposes himself, and returns to confront the gang. He insists that the men apologize to his mule, which of course they refuse to do. As they draw their guns, he quickly shoots each of them in the heart and, one by one, they drop down in the sand. The undertaker, who has been watching the scene from a distance, smiles gleefully at the sight of his new clients. Cinematic spectacle aside, the traveler’s response to the mocking behavior of the men appears excessive, to say the least. What does this reveal about the traveler, who seems not only indifferent to danger, but to life itself? And what does this tell about the landscape he travels through, which not only allows but seemingly encourages, such random acts of violence?

To me, this iconic scene demonstrates a central message of the Dollars trilogy, namely that in the desert, both the environment and the people that dwell there are wild and hostile. This is a place for outlaws, bounty hunters, grave diggers: merchants of death who reflect, and are in turn framed by, the normative desert landscape through which they ride. This link between man and landscape is continually highlighted, as close-ups

of the main characters alternate with wide shots that emphasize that they are embedded in their environment. Their figures are framed by bare hills and distant mountains so that character and landscape merge seamlessly: man emerges from the desert, imitates it, becomes like it, and returns to it in death (French 1997; Tompkins 1992). Nothing is revealed of his past or future, other than that he came from the desert and that he will ride off into it again when the film ends. Indeed, his identity lies not in a name, but in the landscape itself—both man and place are nameless, placeless, timeless.

The Dollars trilogy, and spaghetti westerns in general, are a celebration of heteronormative masculinity. Almost all of the characters are men, the plot takes place in public spaces, physical action and body language are dominant over speech, emotions are hardly expressed at all, pain and discomfort are stoically endured, and death is faced fearlessly (French 1997; Tompkins 1992). Meanwhile, women, when they appear at all, are generally either widows, prostitutes, or damsels in distress; others are mute figures in black dresses who flee the streets as gunmen ride into town. This reveals more than just impoverished stereotypes of traditional gender roles, for which the films have been criticized extensively. Rather, these westerns actively oppose femininity and associated forms of institutional life (Tompkins 1992). In this sense, the desert is a landscape not only characterized by a lack of water but by a lack of institutions. There is no justice, at least not of the kind provided by conventional law and order. Justice exists only in the form of compassion or, more often, the cruelty of personal revenge. Absolute freedom goes hand in hand with the possibility of crimes that will never be punished because there are no laws to criminalize them. And it is the landscape that facilitates this. It offers hiding spots for criminals in the cracks of its mighty rocks, ruined buildings, and desolate graveyards. Quite often, the bandit does not even have to hide, for he is already in a place where the tentacles of civilization do not yet reach. The desert is portrayed as a place where the only ruling entity is the landscape itself, but while this landscape dictates where one can or cannot live and how one can or cannot move, it does not distinguish between what is good or bad. The absence of law and law enforcement are thus but a superficial reflection of a much deeper absence, of what might be called moral law. In the absence of this, the landscape is not so much *immoral* as it is *amoral*: it is profoundly indifferent to the moral constraints that circumscribe civilized human life (French 1997).

The films thus convey the idea that the desert offers people only unsophisticated cultures and savage habits. However, despite their displays of graphic violence, spaghetti westerns are intensely nostalgic, romanticizing a natural landscape that has yet to be corrupted by civilization. This romanticism can easily slide into a form of environmental determinism.

The desert landscape, in this sense, is not just a passive background to the regular occurrences of deceit, theft, violence, and revenge; instead, it makes these human acts possible. It actively *produces* them. But while humans live, fight, and die, the landscape remains changeless. The desert exists on a timescale beyond that of the various human figures who enter it, dwell in it, and must eventually either abandon it altogether or convert it into something else. And precisely this conversion is a recurring theme in the western genre, which shows how the advance of civilization—the coming of the railroad, so to speak—brings an end to the frontier.

Without exception, each of the Dollars films ends in a final standoff. Three men walk onto a paved threshing circle, where they know that at least one of them will die. Staring intensely at each other, they make to draw their guns. Assisted by Ennio Morricone's evocative soundtrack, the scene builds up slowly to its climactic violence. The act of violence itself, when it finally happens, passes in a split second. Today, the cameras are now long gone, the films' actors ageing, but the threshing circle is still in place: a touristic landmark. An accompanying information sign displays a still of this final scene, accompanied by a brief description in four languages. In the background, pulling me back into the present, is a series of long plastic greenhouses, draped over the hills. This is where the Plastic Sea starts.

Landscape Transformation

It is thought-provoking that many of the establishing shots from the Dollars trilogy would be impossible today due to the development of greenhouses. With this and other developments, the arid regions of Almería have undergone an immense transformation over the past half century, resulting in what is now popularly known as the Plastic Sea. This "sea" is an expanse of roughly two hundred square kilometers that is blanketed by plastic greenhouses. At first sight, this human-made landscape offers a stark confrontation with the materialization of a domesticated desert: it is an image of what comes after the western's credits have faded to black, when civilization has been allowed to advance. These greenhouses are used to increase temperatures in winter, producing fruits and vegetables for export to other parts of Spain and Europe. The all-year-round high temperatures inside the greenhouses are a significant competitive advantage in the European food market, and Almería has consequently become an important region in terms of European food security.

Indeed, transforming the desert into a hyperproductive landscape has changed the very patterns of human habitability, not just in relation to sub-

sistence or livelihood, but also in broader cultural terms. There is understandable pride in the transformation of a place previously considered to be “nothing but a desert” into “the orchard of Europe,” with the intensive agriculture answering to a long history of drought and the economic and social deprivation that is supposed to come with it. As such, the Plastic Sea relays the conviction that “the fundamental consequences of drought are due to underdevelopment, and only development can remedy drought” (Anderson 2011: 71). In Spain, such economistic thought, known as *regeneracionismo* (regenerationism), built momentum in the nineteenth century. It portrayed the Spanish nation as having declined in the wake of decolonization in the Americas and instead demanded from society a focus on internal development. Under regeneracionismo, such thinking suggested, the desert could be tamed.

In my own conversations with farmers in Almería, a common explanation I heard for the development of plasticulture was that farmers in the 1950s accidentally found their crops grew better when protected from the dusty winds with plastic sheets instead of traditional fences. Indeed, several early experiments with plasticulture have been recorded. Marín Martínez (2016), for example, writes of a particular grape farm that was the first in Almería to construct a greenhouse in 1959. Although beset by numerous failures in the beginning, it grew through the 1950s and 1960s from a family farm into a business with a workforce of 1,500 men, women, and children. Nevertheless, it would be a romantic fallacy to ascribe this “Almerian miracle,” as the Plastic Sea is also called, to the sheer inventiveness of the farmers. Without dismissing their role, it should be stressed that this development owes much to the National Colonization Institute (Instituto Nacional de Colonización, or INC), which was established by General Francisco Franco’s regime in the immediate aftermath of the Spanish Civil War in 1939 and was a brainchild of regenerationist ideology (Martínez Rodríguez 2018; Rivera Menéndez 2000).

The INC was a response to severe problems in rural Spain in the twentieth century, where a dichotomy between landowners with extensive but scarcely productive plots and peasants living in dire poverty was causing social tensions. Under Franco, Spain became oriented toward self-sufficiency, which meant that the primary sector had to be developed to the extent that Spain was capable of feeding itself. Modernizing agriculture thus became a key element in the ideology of *Franquismo*, or “Francoism” (Centellas Soler, Ruiz García, and García-Pellicer López 2009). This ideology served multiple needs at once: it would increase the productivity of the primary sector, offer better living conditions in rural areas, and prevent urbanization, which was seen as a source of civic unrest and thus a threat to the regime (Pérez Escolano 2009).

Functioning under the Ministry of Agriculture, the INC's main objective was to instigate such developments. It sought to counter the problematics of rural Spain through the organized settlement of families in prefabricated towns, with plots allocated to each family. The basic idea was to increase productivity by populating previously unproductive territories and improving irrigation systems. So, although colonization was primarily a technological reform, it also encompassed a redistribution of land, which in Almería has resulted in a large number of small landowners (Centellas Soler, Ruiz García, and García-Pellicer López 2009; Rivera Menéndez 2000). Selected for colonization were poor, landless nuclear families with five or six members. Rather than placing families in traditional *cortijos* (farmhouses) separated from existing villages, the INC constructed neatly ordered villages for the inhabitants of the new countryside. These new villages were built in modernist architectural style and highly planned: they were to be populated by 80 to 200 families, housing between 500 and 1,000 people, with the distance between the plots and the family residence not to exceed 2.5 km, meaning that the towns were designed to be constructed at 5 km apart (Centellas Soler, Ruiz García, and García-Pellicer López 2009).

Between 1939 and 1971, the INC established around 130 villages in Andalusia, fourteen of them in the province of Almería, of which twelve are in the plains of Dalías and Níjar (Centellas Soler, Ruiz García, and García-Pellicer López 2009). It is no coincidence that these are also the places in which the Plastic Sea is now located. Blessed with large and accessible bodies of groundwater, these regions formed an excellent base for the development programs of the INC, which led "an anxious search for water" by introducing new technologies to extract and distribute groundwater (*ibid.*: 13; see also Rivera Menéndez 2000). Moreover, this development program was a form of propaganda for the authoritarian state. The new clean, white towns, furnished with modern services, favored functionalism and rationalism over romantic nationalism and became emblematic of modern life—the long-envisioned regeneration of the rural environment (Centellas Soler, Ruiz García, and García-Pellicer López 2009), as well as an exertion of state control, and with it, human dominance, over the arid landscape.

In short, the colonization campaign was aimed at preventing, and even reversing, the depopulation of rural Spain and at increasing the efficiency and productivity of its agriculture. Rather than a romanticization of the countryside, or simply an attempt to improve the lives of poor farmers, it was also a regulatory (and repressive) mechanism to prevent excessive urbanization and political resistance. Either way, in Almería, its effects have been overwhelming, and the success of the Plastic Sea is something

that no one could have foreseen (Pérez Escolano 2009). While the introduction of new technologies through the INC, and with them access to groundwater, stimulated a steady growth of plasticulture, this only spiked when Spain entered the European Economic Community in 1986 and access to the European market opened up (Molina Herrera 2005). Both the inward gaze of *Franquismo* and the resistance of other EEC members to admitting the authoritarian regime had prevented Spain from entering the EEC before Franco's death in 1975. The transition to democracy opened up new possibilities for the export of Almería's products. Accordingly, the symbolism of agriculture in the most arid region of Europe appears to have changed drastically. Having long been at the margin of the Spanish national imaginary, the development of plasticulture suddenly propelled Almería into national and European space in new and unexpected ways.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the narrative of Francoist development has remained strongly present in Almería. While I certainly would not suggest that this reflects the perspective of all farmers in the region, several of my interlocutors openly and without being asked expressed appreciation for Franco's development programs. For example, during the lunch break of a seminar on regional water scarcity, in which the irrigation schemes of the INC had been discussed, a farmer at my table spoke up, saying that Franco had been preoccupied primarily with making sure people had food to eat. "We have forgotten," he said, "what it is like not to have food, to be hungry. But that was the case in the past. And that is why Franco developed a large and stable agricultural sector." Knowing that he touched upon a sensitive topic in defending Franco's policy, he added, "And you may or may not like that." For many people in the region and beyond, the Plastic Sea is nothing less than a symbol of modernity and globalization, and it is looked upon in awe: finally, humans have conquered the hostile desert.

Contested Imaginaries

Yet the exceptionality of the local landscape remains (Rivera Menéndez 2000: 15). Nowhere else has agriculture developed into such forms which, while not necessarily "miraculous," still border on the bizarre. Comparing economic growth and migration patterns with other provinces in Spain confirms Almería as a case apart (Molina Herrera 2005). In discursive as well as material terms, the changes are not straightforward. Particularly, the landscape of greenhouses suffers from a bad image. What becomes apparent in media representations of the region, and what I also noticed during my fieldwork, is that the Plastic Sea is popularly associated with

groundwater abuse, pesticides, ugliness, unnatural plastics, the destruction of a natural landscape, and, even more so, illegal migration and labor exploitation—all calling into question to what extent the unruly desert landscape has indeed been subdued to modern civilization.

A very interesting example of this imaginary can be seen in the Spanish detective television series *Mar de Plástico* ('Sea of Plastic' directed by Norberto López Amado, Javier Quintas, and Alejandro Bazzano and first aired by Antena 3 in 2015). Set in a fictive town amidst the greenhouses, the story it tells is not a pretty one. A girl disappears in the night in an alley between two greenhouses. The next morning, her blood is sprayed through the sprinklers in one of the greenhouses and her head is found in a water basin. This gruesome discovery is the prelude for a series of hostile events in a small town in the middle of the Plastic Sea where everyone knows and hates each other, and where everyone has secrets. Racial tensions between white Spanish managers and Black African migrant workers escalate after it becomes known that the girl, who was white, secretly had a Black boyfriend. And while the plot takes the form of a classic detective story, with some love affairs between the characters and plenty of suspects with fraught alibis, the title, *Mar de Plástico*, indicates what this series really is about: the landscape of plastic greenhouses itself.

Although the series was popular throughout Spain, with nearly five million viewers tuning in to the first episode (Miguelé 2015), it was not well received in the Almerian province. The mayor of El Ejido, Francisco Góngora, weighed in and is reported to have said that he did "not believe there is a single *Almeriense* who liked that series" (Estrella Digital 2015). Already before the TV series was aired, farmers' associations expressed their concerns with the "negative stereotypes and exaggerations" it portrayed (León and Martínez 2014). One farmers' association even called upon its members not to watch the first episode and to avoid feeding into the controversy on social media, hoping that the series might be discontinued when viewers' numbers turned out to be low (Vargas 2015). One reason behind this suspicion was that the accents of the actors did not represent Almerian ways of speaking and were considered more similar to Sevillian accents (Rodríguez and Martínez 2015). More importantly, farmers' communities and officials in Almería felt misrepresented with regard to the theme of racism and xenophobia in the series. Jesús Muñoz, president of the provincial separatist group Action for Almería (Acción Por Almería), was reported to have rejected *Mar de Plástico* as "a series that shows our land as a sinister place where indiscriminate crimes and beatings occur" (Rodríguez and Martínez 2015).

Indeed, there is quite graphic, and often racialized, violence shown throughout the series. On some occasions, the greenhouses themselves are

used as tools for torture or as accomplices to crime, their material characteristics making possible the forms of violence that occur. Just as the desert was represented as a landscape where the rule of law could not reach, so the Plastic Sea is portrayed as offering space to a range of illegal activities, with drug deals, prostitution, beatings, and killings happening in and between the greenhouses. Many of the Spanish villagers are introduced as white supremacists, who aggressively deny people of color access to their spaces, and who carry swastika tattoos beneath their shirts. The “immigrants,” on the other hand, are portrayed as living in uncomfortable shacks, in poor conditions, and without access to rights or services. Only gradually do the two clashing groups begin to accept each other as they come to realize they are both suffering from the same crime. Here, *Mar de Plástico* reveals that progress has not brought morality to the desert. On the contrary, it has brought greed and lies, social inequality and violence. Compared to the lynching by racist mobs that is graphically shown in *Mar de Plástico*, the violence of the outlaw figures in spaghetti westerns appears almost innocent. And instead of a standoff between anachronistic emblems of masculine superiority, *Mar de Plástico* exposes the disturbing violence of modernity itself in a transformed yet far from tamed landscape.

Two weeks before the first episode was due to air, Andrés Góngora Belmonte, Secretary of COAG Almería, a major farmers’ union, sent a letter to Atresmedia, stating that “there is much concern in the region for the image that the series ‘Mar de Plástico’ could project of our province and our agriculture” (Góngora Belmonte 2015). The letter urged the producers to base their representation of the agrarian sector on “reality” instead. Góngora emphasized that people with migrant backgrounds had found in Almería a place “to live and thrive,” sketching a situation of mutual respect and harmonious labor relations in which different cultures productively coexist. How fragile this harmony might turn out to be was revealed when he then wrote, “We fear that series like ‘Mar de Plástico’ can distort this reality and generate situations of irritation and tension.” The main message was that a misrepresentation of the region would have the potential to damage labor relations, to tarnish the image of the sector in national and international markets, and ultimately to “cause serious economic damage to the province.” “Should you not respect the reality of our sector,” the letter ominously ended, “COAG Almería reserves the right to undertake as many legal and media actions as are necessary to restore the good image of the Almerian agriculture and farmers, which have cost us so many years to build.”

Unions and politicians are certainly not the least influential parties in Almería, and their concern over the image of plasticulture was immediately responded to by Atresmedia with a statement that “*Mar de Plástico*

is fiction,” and with a promise to include a corresponding statement at the beginning of the series (León 2015). As a result, each episode of the series starts with a white text on black background that reads: “The facts and personages that appear in this series, as well as the locality of Cam-poamargo, are totally invented.” Still, one cannot escape the feeling that this statement signifies precisely the opposite. After all, it was only fifteen years before, on 5 February 2000, that riots had broken out in the municipality of El Ejido. The riots lasted for three days and followed the deaths of three people who had been killed by immigrants. Although both suspects were detained, the events triggered an outbreak of violence that was directed primarily at its Moroccan population, but also at immigrants more generally. Several main access routes were blocked, and establishments and homes of immigrants were attacked, with fire set to buildings and vehicles. The national police were called in from the neighboring provinces to suppress the uprising. The events were discussed in national newspapers in terms of xenophobia, racism, and, as one article in the post-Francoist national newspaper *El País* commented, “racist barbarism” (Constenla and Torregrosa 2000).

Mar de Plástico may be fictional, but its resemblance to the events of February 2000 is hardly a coincidence. No wonder the Almerian agricultural sector feared for its image: framing the local population as xenophobic could potentially rake up old sores. The sector has had to cope with a bad image in terms of its social dynamics. Both national and international media feature pieces on the labor conditions for migrant workers in the greenhouses on a regular basis. *Mar de Plástico* gleefully built upon this negative image of the greenhouse landscape and its inhabitants; the landscape itself may be flooded with light, but the imaginary it reproduces is unremittingly dark.

Making a Moral Landscape

The imaginaries I have described so far stand in stark contrast to the experiences and views of the farmers I encountered during my fieldwork. If anything, these farmers share a sense of pride in their work and in the achievements of their sector and their province. Many of them had committed themselves to sustainability principles, both ecological and socioeconomic. There are many unions and cooperatives in Almería that represent the interests of farmers in the region and in the international market, but which also push for responsible cultivation among their constituents. Environmental concerns, including biodiversity and landscape design, are taken seriously, as is responsible water use. When it comes to

labor, there are numerous social workspaces, and all farmers I spoke with were eager to point out that they paid their laborers fair wages throughout the year. However, nearly all of them also admitted that, every now and then, when the workload exceeded the capacity of the farm's regular labor force, they would temporarily employ undocumented day laborers. For example, Andrés, a small-scale, ecological farmer with three greenhouses of about two hectares total, explained to me:

In agriculture, you may need one person today and tomorrow you need five. The work needs to be done, but of course it's difficult to just find five people and hand it to them. Honestly, throughout the year, you will occasionally have a person who does not have papers. Definitely. Just once, but you will have them. Because you have to do the work, and if there are no people, what will you do?

Like Andrés, my interlocutors did not deny that there was inequality and tension in their industry when it came to labor. Rather, they openly discussed this, often empathizing with migrant laborers while also pointing to structural discrepancies in the national and European immigration policies. For farmers themselves this also posed serious challenges. As Andrés continued:

It is very poorly regulated. There are many people without documents in Spain and in Almería. But if the government lets them stay here, then these people need to work. If you go to Campohermoso or San Isidro in the morning, there will be a lot of Africans there who are asking for work. And there the authorities do not intervene. But later they come to your greenhouse and fine you for employing these people. So, I don't see it. This needs to be regulated, and then we would all be more at peace.

As they were very much aware of the negative imaginary of the Plastic Sea, several local farmers, farmers' unions, and politicians have actively been trying to change this image. A case in point is Lola, a farmer who has opened her greenhouses to the public with guided tours for schools, tourists, and professionals. During these tours, she points to the sustainable modes of production and the technological innovations that have been implemented in the farm, including advanced water circulation, automated systems, and the abolishment of pesticides, as well as to her commitment to providing good labor conditions, fair wages, and social security.

Similarly, Hortiespaña, a sector-wide collaborative, has launched a campaign to improve the image of greenhouse agriculture in the Spanish southeast, adopting the slogan "We are doing it well" (*Lo estamos haciendo bien*). Opposing the image of the Plastic Sea as ugly and unnatural, the campaign makes a bold statement: for a large number of reasons, the Almerian system of production is "one of the most sustainable in the world" (Almería en Verde 2017: 6). As part of this campaign, Hortiespaña has

produced two short videos that are, interestingly, directed at the farmers themselves. The idea behind it, Fransico Góngora Cañizares, president of Hortiespaña, explained during a public roundtable discussion in Almería, is that farmers need to start believing in themselves to then convince the consumer in Spain and Europe. “Farmers feel proud, but they have to manifest the same externally,” Góngora said.

Both videos show images of the Plastic Sea from above—a view that allows its immense scale to be apprehended—as well as from within the greenhouse, in this way seeking to disclose what happens underneath the plastic. This is captured in images of smiling farmers and workers, ripe vegetables, and green leaves. The first video is titled “The reality of cultivation in greenhouses” (*Realidad del cultivo en invernadero*, Hortiespaña 2017a). In two and a half minutes, it seeks to debunk the idea that food produced in greenhouses tastes bad. People in a marketplace are asked what they think of food from a greenhouse, which elicits answers referring to tastelessness, artificiality, and pesticides. Even though we are in the twenty-first century, the narrator says, the image we have of greenhouses seems to be stuck in the 1970s. Being in the twenty-first century means caring for the environment. The video then compares the plastic greenhouse with a plastic rain cover for a baby stroller. “It is our natural instinct to protect what is most important to us.” The video reassures its audience—the Almerian farmers themselves—that there are plenty of arguments for a better public image for Almería. The landscape transformation from “desert” to “orchard” forms a central argument: “If we have been able to convert this arid region into an example of work, evolution, and respect, we are going to be able to change the perception of society.” The video finishes with the statement that this is “a change that starts today.”

The title of the second video, “A sea of reasons to believe in what we do” (*un mar de razones para creer en lo que hacemos*, Hortiespaña 2017b), refers directly to the Plastic Sea. The video starts by recognizing explicitly that plastic is considered unnatural, and that it leads consumers to believe that products from greenhouses are artificial and contaminated. Then it asks: “But what if society, including ourselves, was aware of what really happens underneath this sea of plastic?” The music changes to a happy tune, and once more, landscape transformation is called to the fore. The only thing this region used to export half a century ago, the narrator says, was its own inhabitants who emigrated to find work. Now, Almería is the largest exporter of vegetables in Europe. With this, Almería has also become an example of successful immigration and social integration. The greenhouses are further praised for being independent from subsidies, and for being a model for production that has been adopted across the globe. Also, in terms of biological (as opposed to chemical) pest control,

the narrator asserts, Almería is a world leader. Within Spain, the narrator continues, the southeast is the most efficient in its water use, while within Europe, the Spanish greenhouses use “twenty-two times less energy.” Finally, it is argued that the white plastic reflects sunlight and in so doing combats global warming. “We are doing it well,” the video concludes.

The campaign, and the agricultural practices behind it, demonstrate that in the making of landscape, material transformation and imagination go hand in hand, continuously informing one another. The Almerian farming industry has, as any thriving industry perhaps, been in a process of ever-proceeding innovation. The implementation of automated irrigation systems and biological pest control, as well as discussions of what type of greenhouse is most sustainable and profitable, are examples of how, on an everyday basis, the Plastic Sea is materially transformed. At the same time, the campaign and the narratives of the farmers I spoke with also highlight that these changes need discursive validation, as they seek to frame the landscape in terms of sustainability and quality. Changes in the image of landscape and changes in its materiality require constant reassessment in the face of one another. In a way, the campaigns discussed here continue the transformation from “desert” to “orchard” instigated by the INC decades ago. Only now, the transformation occurs not so much through the material instalment of new technologies as a means of human dominance over harsh terrain, but by trying to influence how the landscape is perceived.

Conclusion

While its materiality and aesthetics have changed profoundly in the transformation from the “desert of Europe” to the “orchard of Europe,” it seems as if the arid landscapes of Almería have somehow retained their unruly character. Effectively going against the dominant desert imaginary, this transformation involved eradicating poverty and enhancing human habitability as well as allowing selected nonhuman species to thrive in a controlled environment. This connected in turn to the perceived Europeaness of the landscape by establishing direct links with the European market. But the transformation from “desert” to “orchard” also suffers from a bad image, not least due to rumors of lawlessness. Now, the desert is productive and fertile, though it is still represented as a wild place, fundamentally “other” to civilized society, which suggests that the landscape imaginary has not been transformed to the same extent as its materiality.

However, there has been a significant symbolic transformation in the nature of hostility in the desert: once associated with wild and uncivilized masculinity, then with fascist-enforced modernizing development, now

it is associated with twenty-first century capitalist exploitation of people and the environment. In the process of taming the desert through agricultural development, it has received an entirely new narrative, namely that of social inequality; and while this is in itself highly undesirable, it might ironically be the ultimate proof that the desert has indeed become a human, habitable place.

This is not to say that imagination and experience influence one another in a direct or necessarily reciprocal manner. I would certainly not suggest that spaghetti westerns, or any other films produced in Almería, have had a direct impact on the way the landscape has been materially transformed. Rather, the images that circulate of the landscape give direction to how it may be experienced and transformed, while the material transformation of landscape inevitably engenders new ways of imagining and representing it. This directional impulse to the “lines of becoming” (Ingold 2011) of people and landscape can be tied to particular characteristics of the landscape itself, primarily its exceptional aridity, but it also relates to more broad-based beliefs in technological innovation and modern progress.

Those farmers who have been struggling against the grain of the desert environment to produce a landscape that is no longer infertile and uninhabitable, but productive and profitable, continue to struggle against the imaginaries associated with it. They face pressure from a European market that demands miserably low prices for their products, migration policies through which member states defer responsibility and leave humanitarian crises to unfold, and media outlets that criticize their entire industry for permitting poor labor conditions. Their efforts to present counternarratives, to demonstrate that they “are doing it well,” are then not a matter of whitewashing an undesirable situation but may be better understood as a step in the modern project of “civilizing” the persistently unruly desert landscape.

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