

The Book of Eli

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## The Book of Eli

The Hughes Brothers' film, *The Book of Eli* jettisons the viewer thirty years into the future after a nuclear war ensues in the United States. Eli has been crossing the desolate country carrying the last known copy of a King James Bible. He believes that he is destined to deliver the book and its message to a society worthy of its value. Not knowing where he is to go, he only knows he is to travel west. Early scenes establish that Eli is a messenger with a purpose. He is a guardian protecting the book on a quest to deliver it. Crossing the vast terrain Eli, arrives at a small dusty, dilapidated town. This frontier image has all the elements of nineteenth century old west including characters that represent, good, evil, as well as law and order. *The Book of Eli* represents the Southwest's raw and jagged terrain in a post-apocalyptic time through its use of landscape, colors, and drought.

*The Book of Eli* opens with the protagonist hiding in a post-nuclear war forest about to shoot an arrow into a cat for food. It is not clear when in the thirty-year period this takes place, though it can be surmised it is early on. The green-gray forest is the beginning of his move west. Eli is seen transitioning across the landscape progressively removing layers of clothing suggesting the temperature is rising. *The Book of Eli* spends most of its principal photography time in New Mexico. Eli is seen in some scenes as small and insignificant against the vastness of the region, which suggests that the land, even though it has been decimated by war, is still greater than one man is. It is not clear if the town commanded by the antagonist, Carnegie, is in New Mexico, Arizona, or California. The nuclear holocaust erased the demarcation lines decades earlier. Production designer, Gae Buckley takes advantage of the bleak region to help tell the story. Using rough, dry land, mountain ranges, and high contrast skies, the landscape is an integral part of the story. However, it is the wide-open flat plains, flanked by mountain ranges, in

the distance that are clear reminders of the Southwest region. The wretchedness of the land is part of the construct of what some consider the Southwestern landscape to be. Windstorms have covered the roads and highways to where they now look like the old wagon and horse trails similar to the old Southwest. The land is barren save for remnants of destruction from the nuclear war. Small shacks and buildings are reminiscent of the old buildings weathered by the southwest. The desolation of the land is amplified by dark clouds and the bright burning sunlight, all masked by a scrim of gloom. It is easy to imagine Eli in an earlier time crossing the southwest in search of a new frontier, which he ultimately finds when he reaches the Pacific Ocean. The rugged landscape sends the message that the Southwest is not a kind and gentle location, but one that requires fortitude of its inhabitants.

An important visual element in *The Book of Eli* is the selected use of color. By using monochromatic colors and desaturation, the feeling of bleakness and despair is amplified. Everything including landscape, costume, set, and props are shown in a pallet void of vivid colors. The use of desaturated colors separates the viewer from current time to a parallel present or future. Richard Misek discusses in his book, *Chromatic Cinema*, that if realistic color signals the here and now, then perhaps digital color signals other times and places of our cultural imaginary (Misek, 2010). The Hughes Brothers use muted and muted colors to enhance the deconstruction of the Southwest's rainbow of colors. Desaturation of color appears in the opening scene of a forest that is shown in muted green and grey. Colors become more monochromatic as Eli moves forward in time. Yet to create contrast against the sunburned land that skies are billowy with a full zone-system of shades of grey. The real colors of the Southwest are more vibrant and ethereal. During the late afternoon, when the sun is low, the Southwest colors vibrate. A land void of color is what many believe the vast lands of the southwest look

like and *The Book of Eli*, supports this myth. This is very different from other parts of the country where the East and West coasts have vibrant colors, and colors that change with the seasons. While there are moments in the film where a limited pallet of red and blue are used it is specific and sparingly. Red appears on blankets, a scarf, and an old, rusted water pump. As Eli makes his way, farther west the desaturation effect begins to lift and more colors begin to appear. Finally, when he reaches the Pacific Ocean, the sky is vibrant blue giving way to the idea of hope and a new civilization. The colors of the Southwest become camouflaged by the desaturation effects used in the film, and are not a true representation of the blue skies and painted walls that have become a trademark for the Southwest.

The viewer sees the lack of water early on as Eli bathes himself not with water, but with wet-nap packets that came from an old pre-war KFC. Eli sips water from his canteen carefully helping the viewer understand its value. Film critic Roger Ebert said, “Water is treasure” (Ebert, 2010). Eli knows as he has traveled west that water has become currency. This is illustrated when Eli enters the town bar and trades valuable items to get his canteen filled. While he waits, Solara, a barmaid, goes to the pump area where water is rationed to the townspeople. This theme runs through *The Book of Eli* as all the people in the town, and those Eli comes across in his travels, are always seeking water. Carnegie in many respects is similar in nature to the character Devine, in *The Milagro Beanfield Wars*. He uses water as a bargaining chip with the people he rules. He knows where the water well is and keeps it protected by his henchmen. The people in the town know the water comes from somewhere, but are too fearful of Carnegie to find it on their own. There are many other scenes where the dry landscape support the fact that water is not available. This lack of water adds to the despair and discouragement of the people Eli comes

across during his journey. This is similar to the despair people who first journeyed to the southwest experienced when water was not abundant.

*The Book of Eli* is as a futuristic western where the Southwestern landscape is a main character. However, it is difficult to identify specific parts of the Southwest in this film. It is also difficult to determine how close to the Pacific Coast, Carnegie's town is. The region is masked by the lack of cities, and filled with vast landscapes, void of people, colors, and water. Nick Pinkerton, in his discussion of the film, says, "... [Eli] wanders endless alkali flats under a leaden sky that never opens up to rain" (Pinkerton, 2010). These hard factors contribute to the independence of some people, and exacerbate the fear and distress others feel as they are ensnared in these desolate lands. While *The Book of Eli* is a dramatic example of the harshness of the Southwest, the film helps viewers understand the complications of landscape, colors, and lack of water that codify the image of the Southwest.

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