Noting the zoom’s conspicuous deployment in American cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s, this paper explores the violent encounters it fosters between bodies and their environments. A tool for rendering proximity amid distance, the zoom variously situates details within larger milieus then isolates, penetrates, and distills them. In doing so, it draws spectators nearer the world while at the same time separating them from it. In this way, I contend, the zoom figures technology under capitalist extension, which likewise takes hold of people and places, stretching out to exploit and “enframe” them, as Martin Heidegger might argue, from assumedly unimplicated positions. The result, which cleaves inside from outside and body from world, excites fantasies of mastery by promising escape as well as possession.

Well-known for its use of the zoom, McCabe & Mrs. Miller (1971) demonstrates this relation for the American frontier in its historical and post-WWII formulations. Set among turn-of-the-century zinc mines, the film links Manifest Destiny to Kennedy’s New Frontier through the economies of extraction they share. The zoom, as I have suggested, corroborates this extraction and its exploitative brutality. However, it also challenges this violence by intensifying encounters between body and world, culture and nature, that the frontier pursues and ignores. In this way, I argue, the zoom reveals the environmental intension, the stretching toward people and places, that capitalist extension facilitates. It thus offers an alternative conception of technology and the relationships it mediates, one that discloses frontier’s “saving power” in addition to its dangers.