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Viewing the Landscape

Photography arrived, we sometimes forget, at the height of an international Romantic movement, when nature was viewed as a revelation of God's work and a repository of spiritual meaning. To some extent, the hierarchy of subjects in painting, which put landscape above the portrait, carried over to photography, as we can see in a pronouncement like the following by the Revd H. J. Morton in *The Philadelphia Photographer*: 'What is [portraiture] in comparison with representing and actually reproducing the etchings of the Almighty on the rocks, and His mouldings, and carvings, and textures in cliffs, and hillsides, and velvet mosses?'¹ Yet like the portrait, the landscape photograph relied initially on a long-established tradition in the fine arts, and many of the early photographs, inspired by paintings, feature a vista of land and water framed by trees, with a distant view of mountains, all brought into view from a foreground perspective.

In certain respects the photographer could not compete at all with the artistry of the painter: in 1871 photographer William Henry Jackson travelled with Thomas Moran, learning lessons in composition from the great painter and frankly acknowledging the superiority of Moran's medium in capturing the 'color and atmosphere of spectacular nature'.² Painters had at least three advantages over photographers: they could add or subtract imagery from the scene in front of them; they could paint in colours that imitated, even surpassed, nature's; and their huge canvases (measuring at least ten feet across and seven high) could create an overpowering effect on the viewer. Nineteenth-century photographers eventually had their 'mammoth' size prints, but they were miniscule by comparison (up to 20" x 25"), though far larger than the earlier daguerreotype plates had been (a normal full plate was 6½" x 8½"). And the black and white of the nineteenth-century photograph (even when clouds were added from another negative in a combination print) obviously lacked the colour and drama of the painting. Nevertheless, from the earliest daguerreotype to the wet collodion process, the landscape view made an impression that was uniquely its own: as daguerreotypist Robert Vance claimed, regarding his Views of California: 'These views are no exaggerated and high-coloured sketches, got up to produce effect, but are as every daguerreotype must

detail of 25

Landscape photography in America covers an enormous range of work that cannot easily be made part of a unitary discourse. Several analytic schemes have been proposed: Daniel Wolf, in *The American Space*, categorized nineteenth-century photographs according to their subject matter: Space, Rocks, Trees, Waterfalls, Light (all part of 'Nature'); and Indians, Man and Space, Trains, and Growth (part of 'Man and Nature').⁵ Weston Naef, in *Era of Exploration*, devised a framework that encompassed subject matter (e.g. Yosemite, railroads) and function (government patronage for official surveys; scientific projects), all the while recognizing the aesthetic

experimentation of these early landscape photographers.⁶ Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock, looking at the broader sweep of landscape photography from the beginnings to the late twentieth century, developed multiple categories (thematic and formal) for viewing the landscape: as Artistic Genre; as God; as Fact; as Symbol; as Pure Form; as Popular Culture; as Concept; as Politics and Propaganda.⁷ And more recently, Merry Foresta has focused on the moral and aesthetic dimensions of contemporary landscape photography, encompassing 'the new environmentalism'.⁸

be, the stereotyped impression of the real thing itself.⁹ As with the portrait, the ability of the photographic image to offer a literal view of reality endowed it, in the nineteenth century, with the unique virtues, uncannily appealing, of literal mimesis.

Although America has been called 'Nature's Nation', there has been no nationally fixed idea of nature; rather, it has changed dramatically over the years, and photographs have inevitably reflected these changes. By the time photography was introduced in the United States, the wilderness had lost much of its earlier unholy resonance as a fearful place of savages. With the transformation of forests and arable land into farmlands, nature seemed hospitable to Americans' efforts to plant some form of civilization; and the destiny of America, its famously 'manifest destiny', seemed to lie in the ever-expanding frontier, moving westward as the push of peoples from the American East extended across the land. In 1869 the transcontinental railroad was completed, amid a fanfare of celebratory photographs. Nature, in this nineteenth-century context, was land to claim and defend in the name of the US government; it was a wild land to be exuberantly explored, mined, and mapped, with an eye to military occupation or industrial development. And it was spectacularly beautiful landscape—sweeping vistas of canyons, mountains, valleys—America's answer (making a virtue of necessity) to the European complaint that Americans were a rude people, lacking a culture. At the end of the century, when the closing of the frontier was officially pronounced by historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, a mood of nostalgia took possession, and the landscape became a grandeur to be remembered, to be framed within the gentler boundaries of the picturesque. (It is in this mood that the movement to preserve the land in state and national parks begins.)

15 William and Frederick Langenheim
The Falls of Niagara, 1845
Possibly the first photographs of Niagara Falls, this daguerreotype panorama was modelled on the popular painted panoramas of the time, though far smaller (the whole was about 12" x 18") and comprising a more discontinuous survey. Eight sets were made and, promoting the new art, were presented to Daguerre, President Polk, and several European monarchs. Photography was of immense importance in developing the habits of tourism, with all its accompanying industries.

Moving into the twentieth century, the photographer continued to draw inspiration from the landscape, but now often the heady optimism of the nineteenth century seemed to have turned into the hangovers of the twentieth, as photographers felt viscerally some of the consequences of that earlier exuberance—the ravages of soil erosion, industrial pollution, overpopulation, and overbuilding.

There are many ways of thinking about landscape photography, but the aim here is to offer a simple yet comprehensive framework for approaching this complex genre, emphasizing three broad types of landscape, according to their respective purposes: the *view*, which renders the scene itself as a spectacle of wonder; the *aesthetic landscape*, where the photographer's artistic vision animates the image; and the *topographic photograph*, where the image is more descriptive and is part of a larger political or scientific discourse. These divisions are of course somewhat arbitrary, and a single photographer might produce work that bridges these categories; still, they may usefully serve to distinguish several broad purposes, in fairly distinct traditions that span the history of photography from its beginnings to our own day.

View photography

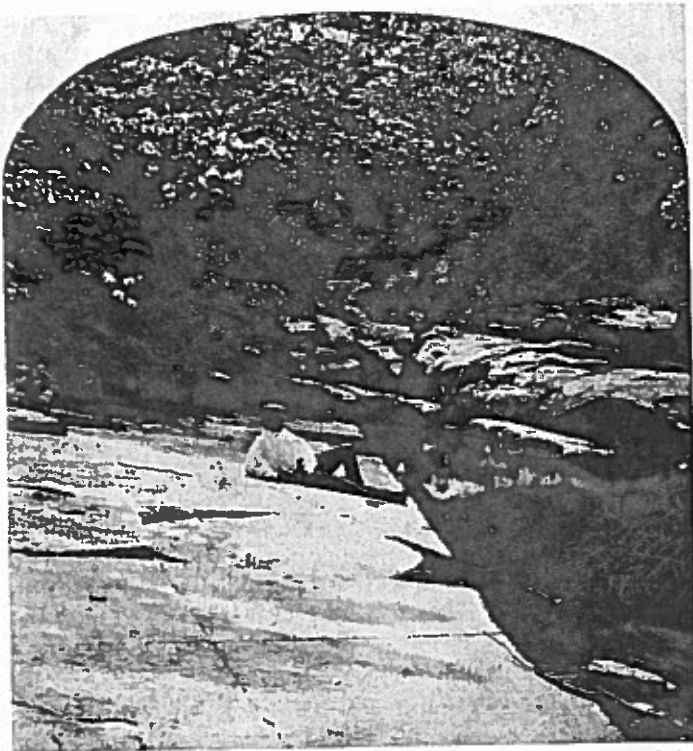
In the view tradition we stand in awe before the sublimity of nature, our attention focused on the scene before us. The view tradition begins in the daguerreotype era, when the Western territories were largely inaccessible and the most dramatic images the East could offer were



16 John Moran

*Geddes Brook, a Tributary of
Tohican, Pennsylvania,
c.1855-65*

Philadelphia photographer John Moran evokes the peaceful side of nature in this picturesque treatment of a secluded brook. At the centre of the scene is the lounging observer, stick in hand, relaxed and contemplative, at home in this friendly environment of rocks, trees, and water. This was a typical scene for painters and photographers of this time, evoking a sense of harmony between humans and nature, with its literary parallels in the contemporaneous work of Henry David Thoreau.



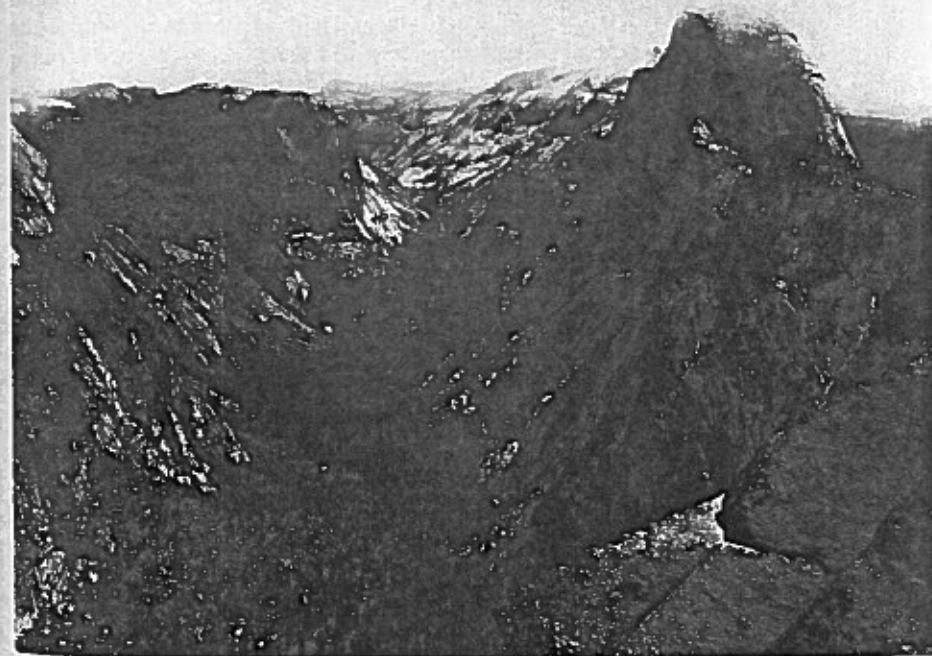
the great waterfalls, such as Niagara and Seneca. Pushing beyond the single plate, several daguerreotypists in the 1840s attempted to create panoramas (imitating the popular painted panoramas), mounting five, six, or seven small plates together in an elaborate frame to compose a wide view as, for example, in the Langenheim brothers' version of Niagara Falls, one of the most popular subjects for Eastern photographers [15].

The daguerreotype, limited to a single positive image (and limited in size) offered little incentive to the commercial photographer: his customer would pay for a portrait of himself but would be unlikely to afford a landscape image at the same price. All of this changed as photographic processes shifted to wet collodion, which produced negatives from which countless replicable images (single prints and stereographs) could be made and sold. Photography studios that were specializing in portraits could now branch out to include a line of landscapes from all over the country, produced by the major studios on the East and West coasts.⁸ By the 1860s Eastern photographers were lugging their equipment through New Hampshire, New York, and Pennsylvania, aiming, as John Moran (the painter's brother) put it, to 'create imagery which calls forth ideas and sentiments of the beautiful' [16].⁹

17 Carleton Watkins

*The Half Dome from Glacier
Point, Yosemite. No. 101,
c.1866*

In this mammoth plate, about 18" x 21", Watkins looks out over the valley, placing the viewer in space, nearly free of the foreground on the lower right. The composition emphasizes the sublime majesty of the vista, evoking a religious sense of awe as our eye is drawn down the valley to the distant horizon. The half-dome mountain on the right was one of the most photographed sights in Yosemite. Watkins typically excluded the human figure from his views, giving us a sense of what nature might be like before mankind came on the scene.



The most powerful landscape images were being made in the West, by San Francisco photographers Carleton Watkins and Eadweard Muybridge, who gradually learned to go beyond the picturesque Romanticism of the East in presenting a nature that was sublimely unpeopled, with huge vistas under open skies. Where the picturesque featured trees and rivers, a scene one might walk into, the sublime invited the viewer to gape in awe at the vista, often seen from above, looking into a vast valley [17]. Although their equipment today seems impossibly bulky and heavy, photographers managed to climb to the tops of mountains, stretching the lens out to record a view that seemed taken from mid-air, the immediate ground rendered invisible by the camera's frame; the effect in the stereograph was even more dramatic, radically changing our sense of space, opening it up to the drama of nature in a way that would capture the attention of painters like Frederick Church, who used photography as an aid in his own grand-scale paintings.¹⁰

Watkins, who in the early 1860s pioneered the use of the mammoth-size camera, was awarded a medal at the 1868 Paris exposition, establishing the pre-eminence of his studio on the West Coast. But Eadweard Muybridge, who had migrated from England and, following an apprentice period, opened up a studio in San Francisco,

18 Eadweard Muybridge

Loya (The Sentinel), Valley of the Yosemite, No. 14, 1872

Muybridge catches the reflection of the trees in the water, and places a pair of symmetrical trees at the centre of the image; clouds are faintly visible in the sky above the looming Sentinel mountain. The composition of this photograph imitates the typical construction of landscape painting, with the use of deep perspective and three main sections of the view: the foreground, the middle, and the background. But Muybridge's camera includes the bare and twisted sticks, individualizing the scene. Such photographs, especially in the mammoth size here (18" x 21") were instrumental in furthering the idea of California as a natural paradise.



was soon producing his own technically innovative pictures. Muybridge's images show a responsiveness to shadows, reflections, mists, and perceived symmetries; they also show Muybridge's inventiveness, in creating composite photographs that included clouds, which would otherwise register as a bright blur on the slow plate required to capture the earth. Around 1869 Muybridge began shooting the clouds separately, printing them together with the landscape portion to create a composite. Above all, Muybridge's compositions demonstrate his love of contrast between foreground and background, between light and dark [18].

Ansel Adams

The direct descendant of this view tradition in the twentieth century is Ansel Adams, whose extraordinary technical skills resulted in the invention of what he called the Zone System. Adams, whose popularity in the mid-twentieth century helped bring photography in general to a wide audience, wedded a strong subjective impression of the pristine beauty of nature to a scientific obsession with the gradations of tone from pure black to pure white [19]. (The very American combination of Romanticism and science might account in part for Adams's strong appeal.) Working in some of the same areas of the Yosemite Valley as his nineteenth-century predecessors, Adams inspired his viewers with the feeling of God's presence in nature, harmonizing well with a growing national sentiment for the environment that would flower eventually in the lush colour photographs of Eliot Porter and the Sierra Club calendar. Though Adams influenced many, both

19 Ansel Adams

Monolith, the Face of Half Dome, Yosemite Valley, California, c.1927

Adams chooses to come in close up to Half Dome, revealing the steel grey surface of the rock face, with its delicate vertical lines. Here, geology is sublimated into an abstract composition of grey tonality, the white snow, and the black sky, edged by the white reflections off the top surface of the mountain. Adams's camera reveals a scene we would not see with the naked eye, rendering the details with a greater reality than we would ordinarily be conscious of.



amateur and professional, through the dissemination of his technical system, the sheer virtuosity of an Adams print is unique: the subtle gradations of tone and contrast; the detail in surfaces of rocks, ice, trees; the atmospheric effects of clouds, snow, ice, all subsumed within a discourse of sublimity.¹¹

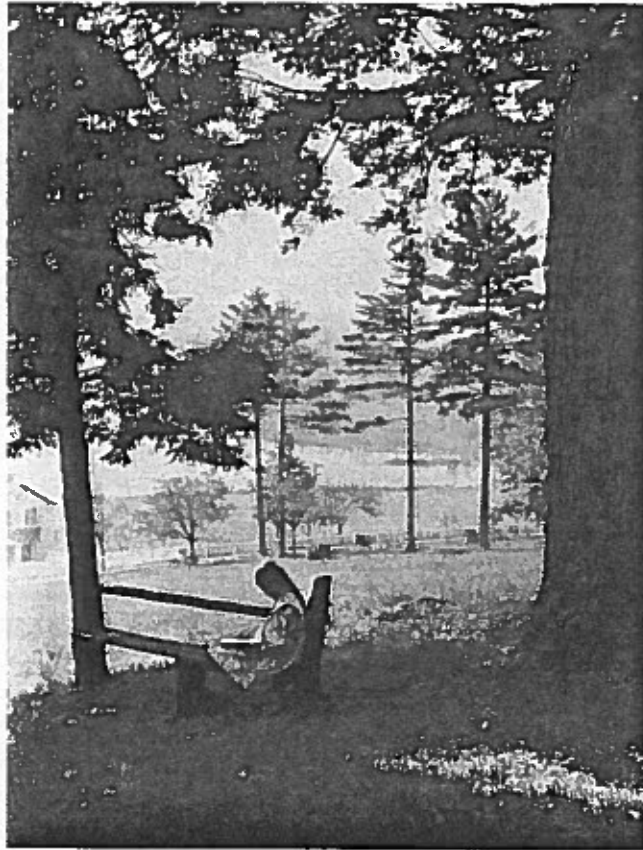
If Adams was tapping into a feeling for nature in a century that would be dominated by the machine, one could see this same sentiment in many other places: in the growing national and state park systems, in the pursuit of nature through camping; in the land preservation and environmentalist movements. One could see it even earlier, in the mid-nineteenth century's rapidly expanding urban park movement, exemplified by Frederick Law Olmsted's Central Park, which raised landscape design to a fine art, supported by a social vision that would bring the different social classes together in the same recreational space, under the civilizing and ennobling influence of nature. Photography, by promoting the spiritually uplifting value of nature, contributed crucially to these cultural changes, creating symbols that crystallized and made tangible these feelings.

The aesthetic landscape

Given the wide availability of prints and stereographs—including thousands of landscape images—many enthusiastic amateurs were drawn into the mysteries of making images themselves, often in newly established camera clubs. More than thirty Philadelphians, for example, banded together in 1862 to establish the Photographic Society of Philadelphia, a harbinger of the growing amateur movement, where the focus was on sharing technical information and on exhibitions which promoted artistic standards in a variety of genres. The emphasis in landscape photography was on the medium's aesthetic potential, as adumbrated by Philadelphian Marcus Aurelius Root in *The Camera and the Pencil* (1864): 'sun painting is not a mere mechanical process . . . it is one of the fine arts'.¹² Another Philadelphian, John Moran, affirmed the primacy of the artist's impression

20 John Griscom Bullock
Untitled (Girl Reading under Tree), c.1898

One of America's leading amateurs, Bullock had the advantage of being a chemist. He helped organize the early photographic exhibitions on the East Coast and himself exhibited at international shows and with Stieglitz's Photo-Secession. Bullock's dark foreground subject contrasts with the lighter background scene, emphasizing the quiet and harmonious moment of the little girl, comfortably perched on a forest bench. The image captures an idealized moment of serenity in nature at a time when cities and factories were coming to dominate American life.



21 Anne Brigman

The Dying Cedar, c.1909

Using her own body, Brigman mimics the shape of the cedar, suggesting the union of woman and tree, of human life and natural life, and evoking the mythologies of pagan nature, of dryads and Pan figures. The freedom of the pose and its implicit sexuality marked the liberation of the New Woman from the constraints of Victorianism, a liberation echoed in the contemporaneous new dance of Isadora Duncan and the Bohemian spirit of the intellectual communities from California to Greenwich Village.



of nature and was especially attentive to atmospheric effects and the changes of light at sunset. As the Philadelphia club evolved (and we can take it as representative of similar clubs in Boston, New York, Chicago), its members went off on excursions to the surrounding countryside, coming back with visual trophies of a picturesque nature—peaceful streams, country roads, ponds, and woods—bucolic scenes that belied the growing industrialization of the cities and paralleled the local colour movement in literature. Often including a human figure contemplating the beauties of the scene before him, the naturalistic photography of the amateur camera enthusiasts (e.g. John Griscom Bullock, Robert S. Redfield, Henry Troth) was founded on

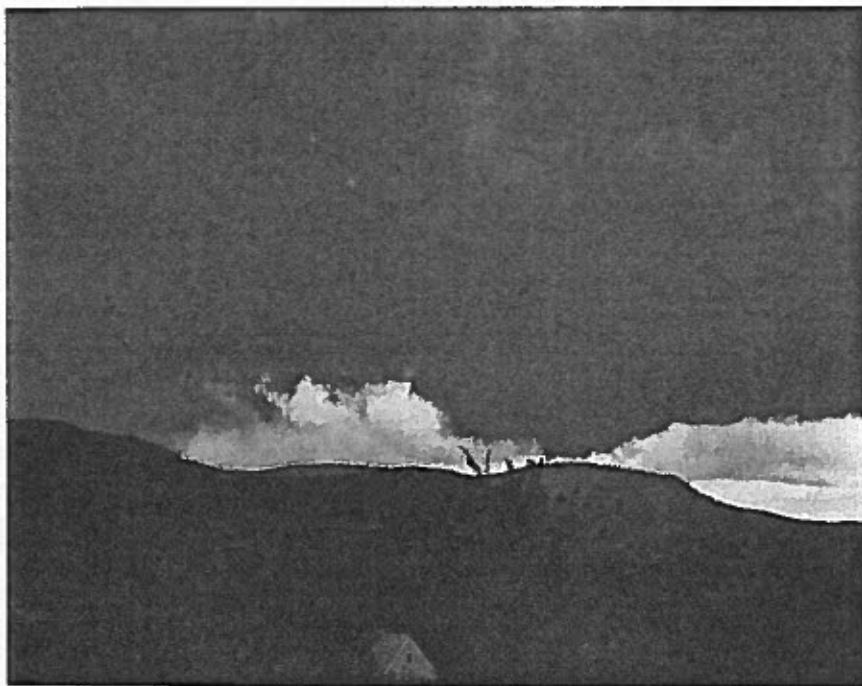
22 Alfred Stieglitz

*Equivalent: Music No. 1,
Lake George, New York, 1922*
Stieglitz's horizontal

composition emphasizes the dark, heavy clouds closing down on the still-lighted horizon, while the earth below is shrouded in darkness. The farmhouse façade, glowing with reflected light, is brought out in Stieglitz's careful printing technique. The title suggests the effort to go beyond the literal landscape and evoke some transcendental sense of abstract feeling, the equivalent of music—again in the abstract. By evoking music, Stieglitz was bringing photography into the larger aesthetic realms of synaesthesia and symbolism.

the aesthetic of the picturesque, far different from the wilder scenes—usually devoid of human presence—that characterized the sublime view photographers.¹³

This naturalistic photography became the foundation of a new landscape aesthetic that gradually replaced the older sublime with a softer, more delicately impressionistic work that would establish the landscape image within the context of the fine arts. Emerging out of the amateur circles, a group of photographers associated with Alfred Stieglitz opened up the aesthetics of landscape to even more subjective interpretation, moving away from the regional and the sentimental and towards a more allegorical treatment that transcended the particulars of a given place to achieve a more universal image of beauty, constructed under the inebriating influence of the Symbolist and Aesthetic movements in Europe. These more aesthetically fine-tuned photographers—Pictorialists—sought the moonlit landscape, the twilight atmosphere, the hazy mist of dawn, evoking a moodiness and dreaminess that was enhanced through techniques that in various ways manipulated the print: through gum bichromate coatings that could be brushed on the paper to achieve a softening effect; or through gauze placed over soft-focused lenses, creating a subdued tonal harmony that



stimulated the imagination. With nudes allegorically dressed as forces of Life and Nature, or else assuming the role of pastoral nymphs and Greek boy-gods, the American forests were peopled with mythological creatures, figures of the soul's aspirations beyond everyday life, perhaps also of the artist's alienation from everyday America.

Stieglitz, who supported such work by Photo-Secessionists like Alice Boughton, Anne Brigman [21], F. Holland Day, Gertrude Käsebier, Edward Steichen, and Clarence White, advocated a self-conscious aestheticism that would lift photography to the level of the other fine arts.¹⁴ By the early decades of the twentieth century, a gulf had developed in the discourse of landscape, between Postcard America and the Aesthetic Landscape of Stieglitz's Photo-Secession. The postcards, inheritors of the nineteenth-century conventions, featured the mountains and waterfalls of the view tradition, and also the more local picturesque scenery of the naturalistic tradition;¹⁵ the Photo-Secessionists, appealing to a far smaller segment of the art public, evoked the subtler moods of the soul. Stieglitz himself had evolved a notion of 'equivalents', that sought in natural symbols (clouds, especially) the emblems of the soul's condition [22]. In his photographs of trees and of the hills surrounding his Lake George house, one can see a more abstract treatment of landscape, emphasizing simple, formal elements, and corresponding to Stieglitz's sense of the suggestive power of nature's moods.

The topographic photograph

From the 1860s on, photographers had been called upon to survey in detail the features of a place or region, working usually under the auspices of an agency that required, for its own purposes, a photographic record. One of the great photographers in this mode was Timothy O'Sullivan who, following his work during the Civil War, was hired by geologist Clarence King in 1867 to record the geological features of the Southwest. O'Sullivan travelled throughout Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Idaho, and parts of California for several years, producing photographs that would survey the mountains, deserts, gorges, waterfalls, valleys, and rivers of the Western territories, furnishing images that could be read as supporting King's theories of the earth's eruptive changes [25].¹⁶ O'Sullivan's images certainly are, on one level, literal and revealing pictures of earth formations, but they also have a powerful aesthetic dimension that compels us to construe some wilful intention on the photographer's part. At least once O'Sullivan remained at the same spot, high above a vista looking down into a valley at a huge rock face from morning till evening, taking images of the scene at different times of the day, thus revealing the scene under different lighting conditions—an effect that would lend clarity to geological observation but also one that suggests a sophisticated understanding of photography as



23 Timothy O'Sullivan
Desert Sand Hills near Sink of Carson (Nevada), 1868
 O'Sullivan was often travelling through extremely inhospitable territory—vacant of inhabitants, trees, water. He frequently posed a member of his party in the picture for scale, and possibly with a more suggestive intention; here, the footprints visible in the sand, leading to the camera's position, confirm a point of observation on an otherwise bleak scene. The wagon, carrying the elaborate equipment and chemicals needed to produce photographs at this time, has already been turned around and is heading back to wherever it had come from.



24 William Henry Jackson
Rocks below Platte Cañon (Colorado), 1870
 The unusual rocks, jutting forward out of the earth, would make this a noteworthy spot for Jackson to photograph; their forward thrust gives a feeling of forward movement to human progress across the canyon. Jackson frames the image to emphasize the diagonal movement from lower left to upper right. Images like this were designed to make travel through the Western territories look safe and leisurely, as well as entertaining, a conception that would be supported by the lounging travellers in the right foreground.

O'Sullivan and Jackson

In addition to the geological surveys, the major employers of topographic photographers in the nineteenth century were the new railroads. The images they commissioned, designed to record the triumphant progress of industrial civilization across the continent, embody the optimistic mood of the age more obviously than O'Sullivan's. One such photographer, whose long career stretched from the 1860s to the 1930s, is William Henry Jackson, who, like A. J. Russell and Charles Savage, was employed beginning in the late 1860s to make railroad pictures that would promote transcontinental travel to the West by showing the most attractive scenes—from a tourist angle—along the way.

Though O'Sullivan and Jackson were both working within the topographic tradition, two photographers could hardly be more different. Thus, Jackson photographed rocks in the shape of teapots, natural geysers, and the railroad train itself creeping miraculously along the edge of a huge rock face. Jackson's

optimistic, forward-looking views of the West are summed up by the image of a wagon moving across a vast prairie framed by mountains [24]. The whole scene speaks of the easy progress of travel, echoing in the forward motion of its line the forces of nature. Compare this to O'Sullivan's characteristic image of a mule-drawn wagon in the desert: it moves into the middle space of the photograph, only to make a U-turn and appear to depart without having traversed the scene [23]. The opposition of nature to man's quest is obvious here, and it is framed ironically by the recorded footsteps of the photographer as he walked across the sand with his camera to a distant point where he could survey the travelling darkroom in all the futility of its movement, yet with an implied triumph—through the photograph itself—as well. O'Sullivan's seemingly more existential view of man in nature would appeal to the sensibility of the last twenty-five years, which could see in him at least the traces of a Symbolist.

an essentially temporal medium. O'Sullivan's inclusion of human subjects (his assistants) in many of his photographs often takes on a strangely suggestive quality, as they lurk in the shadows of rocks, and other, man-made structures; although the human figure had a practical purpose in these images—to denote the scale of the view—it evokes a sense of the vulnerability and fragility of the human intrusion upon the Western landscape.¹⁷

With the settlement of the Western territories over the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the violent suppression of the Indian tribes, the frontier would become gradually mapped and surveyed, domesticated, settled, and eventually made safe for the tourist; by the turn of the century, Buffalo Bill would be playing himself on stage, re-enacting his exploits for a popular audience, and Edward Curtis would be posing his Indians in heroic aspects. If the mood of the nineteenth century was an essentially optimistic one, happy in its discovery and exploitation of the American continent, the twentieth century began gradually to wake up from that dream, look around, and see everywhere the destructiveness of the machines that had invaded the garden. For the twentieth century, the pastoral image could only be an ironic one. During the Depression of the 1930s, for example, the



25 Timothy O'Sullivan

Crab's Claw Peak, Western Nevada, 1869

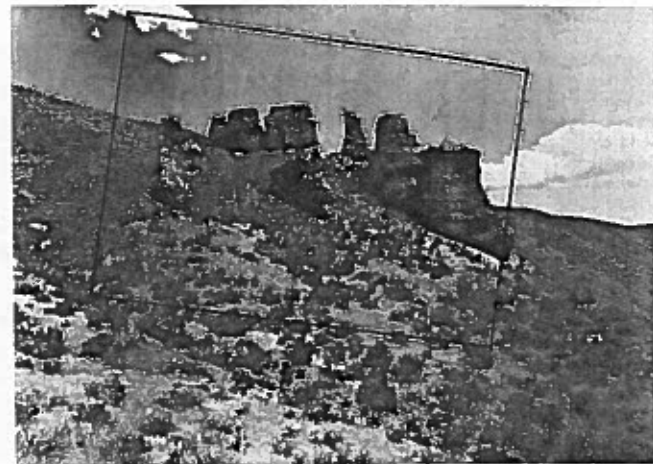
O'Sullivan's photographs often seem to be literal renderings of the earth's surface, as in this image, where two plates come together and erupt upward at the point of contact. The earth was a record of past changes, according to Clarence King, the director of the geological survey, and in this eruption would be evidence of the abruptness of change in the earth's surface (an implicit refutation of Darwin's gradualism).

photographers of the Farm Security Administration, directed to provide pictures of the South and Midwest that would describe the ravages of the drought, produced images of farmlands turned to deserts, parched soil, ravaged crops, and eroded hillsides. Farmers, once proud of their lands and labour, were now forced to join the mass exodus to the supposedly greener pastures of California. Arthur Rothstein and Dorothea Lange photographed the forlorn houses of the farmers, deserted before the onslaught of the predatory tractors of the big agri-businesses, which took what they could, as efficiently as they could, from the land [66]. Anti-pastoral images like these would mark themselves upon the Depression psyche, reinforced by Pare Lorentz's epic documentary film, *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, and by John Ford's motion picture, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

New topographics

With the post-World War II growth of the suburbs in America and of the massive commercial corridors of megalopolis up and down the East Coast; with the urban sprawl of California and the decentering of once-flourishing urban locales into so-called 'edge cities'; with a pervasive sense of the fragility of our ecosystem, our whole attitude towards land use underwent a dramatic shift. Beginning in the 1970s, a growing

26 Rick Dingus
Witches Rocks, Weber Valley, Utah, 1978
Dingus was part of the Rephotographic Survey Project, whose goal was to find the exact location where photographers like O'Sullivan and Jackson stood, and re-take the shot at the exact time of day (and season) as the original. In this case, the photograph reveals that O'Sullivan cropped his image and tilted the horizon on the camera in order to achieve a more dramatic effect of eruption. This sort of manipulation of the image, along with other, even more radical techniques, was not uncommon among nineteenth-century photographers, although the public was generally unaware.



body of work moved our relationship to nature to the centre of cultural consciousness, and photographers turned their attention to describing often with a critical edge, the human presence in once pristine lands. Much of this topographic work, renewing our sense of place, was inspired by the nineteenth century. The most obvious link to the earlier work of Watkins, O'Sullivan, and Jackson, was the Rephotographic Survey Project (RSP), which attempted systematically to re-create the classic photographs taken by their predecessors a hundred year before [26].¹⁸

The act of seeing the landscape cannot, of course, be a purely 'objective' one, we realize. And that point was made even more explicitly the subject of photographs by a group of landscape photographers influenced by the conceptual art movement of the 1970s. This work took the investigations of the RSP into a more self-conscious field, moving us to contemplate the act of viewing itself. In Robbert Flick's work, for

27 Robbert Flick

*Near Live Oak I, Joshua Tree
National Monument,
California, 1981*

The grid structure imposes an artificial format upon the landscape, forcing us to step back and accept the composite as a new thing, apart from nature. Looking closely, we discover that adjacent images repeat the subject from different distances, angles, and lighting. The result is a viewing that moves the eye back and forth from detail to whole. Flick's use of multiples creates a tension between the regular grid structure and the irregular shapes that populate each of the squares.



example, a 'composite' image contains a square grid-like arrangement of dozens of smaller images, each of which is a photograph of a given field of vision [27]. Borrowing something from the panorama technique, Flickr adds one image to another to create the larger whole; but Flickr's images overlap in subject; or they will take the same subject—a boulder or rock formation—from two different points of view. The viewer cannot see the whole, really, in anything like a traditionally composed view, which mimics our perspective vision; instead, Flickr's Cubistic rendering fragments the scene, forcing us to look closely at the parts and move back to the whole, then close-up again, as we gradually put together in our mind's eye a sense of what the whole means. Flickr's work is thus about vision itself, and about representation—about the ways we see the landscape before us.¹⁹

Where Flickr analyses the act of representation, leaving the subject alone, in John Pfahl's work, the site itself, the landscape being imaged, is altered *before* the image is taken. Pfahl might, for example, place some boulders around in a circle, but not complete the circle; instead, several rock places are 'saved' by an outline on the ground. In another, Pfahl chooses a large rock face that is jutting out at an acute angle from the earth; he places strings before the scene, with lines running at the same angle as the striations in the rock, thus 'matching' our human intervention and the natural. In these and other works, Pfahl examines the process by which the landscape is altered and seen, for each of these works depends on its particular angle of vision to make its point.²⁰ The reflexive, self-interrogating nature of all of this work takes us to a kind of ultimate theoretical point of postmodern self-consciousness in terms of viewing the landscape.

Landscape photography was not, however, swallowed up in self-consciousness in the late twentieth century. Instead, a number of photographers wanted to re-focus our attention on what must be seen. A landmark exhibition at George Eastman House in 1975 marked the importance of this new work. New Topographics, as it was called, focused on the 'man-altered landscape' in the work of ten photographers, including Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, and Nicholas Nixon. It was the premise of these photographers that Americans have not been kind to their natural spaces: tyre tracks from recreational vehicles mar the deserts; telephone poles and wires block out once pristine vistas; gas stations, billboards, and roadside entertainments trek across the continent; forests have fallen victim to greed, and so on. Such sights have been the preoccupation, for example, of Robert Adams, who, drawing upon the view tradition of the nineteenth century, has ironically qualified the beauties of the landscape by showing, in often subtle ways, the tell-tale marks of a blighting human presence.²¹

Another figure of great importance in this mode is Lewis Baltz,

28 Lewis Baltz

Prospector Village, Lot 85, Looking West, Park City, Utah, 1980

Baltz's deadpan view of the new desert real estate developments of the West shows us the vulnerability of even the bleakest of desert spaces to human intrusion. Here, the debris related to the construction of housing estates occupies the foreground, while in the background, a vista stretches out towards the horizon, imitating the expanse of space that is the signifier of the West. Baltz's irony cuts two ways: into the Western landscape tradition, reducing the scale of the mountains, and into the architectural efforts of man to make his mark on the landscape.



who, over the years, has created a body of work that critiques the effects of technology on the landscape, showing us our public places, our housing estates, our industrial parks—the new landscapes of the post-modern era [28]. It is not a pretty sight: the construction of housing in Park City reveals a sun-baked community of angular, modest homes, scattered in the midst of a vast, inhospitable, treeless space. Baltz's extended series, *Candlestick Point* (1989), offers close-ups of a nature that has been defiled by the random waste, the ramshackle chaos of speculative ambition. Standing behind Baltz, as Jonathan Green has observed, is Charles Sheeler's 1930s visualization of the industrial landscape, in paintings like *Classic Landscape* (1931), which offer a hard-edged, precisionist rendering of factories that have grown into the land, displacing whatever natural vistas might previously have been there.²²

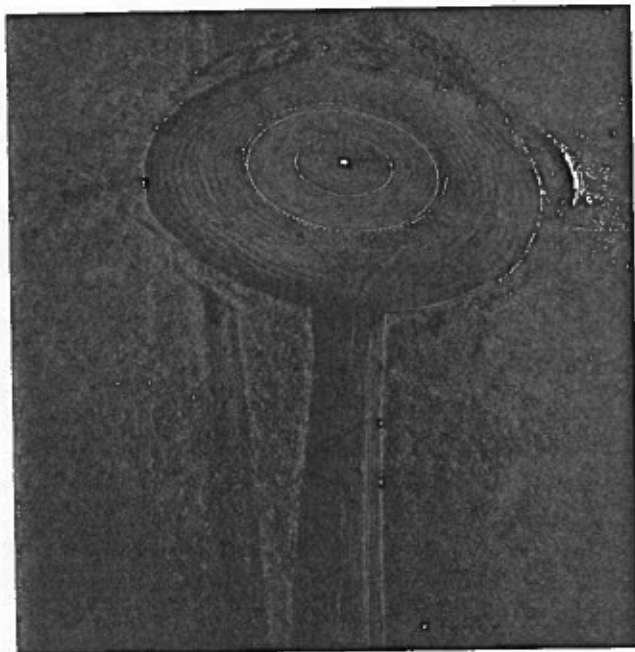
Aerial photographs originated in France, when Nadar (Gaspard-Felix Tournachon), aloft in a balloon, made spectacular views of Paris in 1858; meanwhile, the Boston photographer, James Wallace Black, captured views of Boston in 1860. Black proposed using aerial reconnaissance during the Civil War, but it was not until World War I that the military uses of photography were exploited. Oddly enough, it was Edward Steichen (serving at that time as the commander of the Army's photographic division) who pioneered its use. Entering the war as a pictorialist, Steichen emerged a modernist, following his discovery of the new world of scientific and precision photography.²³ Subsequently, there have been many different uses for aerial photography: surveying the earth for minerals and resources, assessing the condition of forests, locating archaeological remains, gathering military intelligence, and so forth.

The aesthetic dimensions of aerial photography have also been explored, in the late twentieth century, in the work of photographers like Terry Evans and Emmett Gowin.²⁴ Evans's images of the Midwestern prairie seem like purely aesthetic constructions—a revelation of the earth's patterns as seen from an airplane, showing natural features and areas of cultivation, yet from a distance that creates,

29 Terry Evans

Smoky Hill Bombing Range Target, Tires, Kansas, 1990

Seen from the air, the bombing target, like the ancient earth drawings of prehistoric peoples, has the gigantic simplicity and aesthetic coherence of Abstract Expressionism. The dark earth around the target has a rough textured quality, compared to the smooth lines of the target itself, drawn in circles, with two white inner rings and a square centre. The beauty and simplicity of the form conceal the potential violence and destructiveness of the scene.



inevitably, an abstraction. Evans's intentions, however, go well beyond aesthetic construction. The altered landscape may reveal, as one title tells us, the *Smoky Hill Bombing Range Target, Tires* (1990), a bull's eye carrying the imminent possibility of violent destruction [29]. Even the agricultural landscapes as seen from the air may harbour a complexity not immediately apparent. Attracted first to the perfection of the prairie ecosystem, Evans found himself trying to picture 'the prairie in all its disturbed, cultivated, inhabited, ingratiated, militarized, raped, and beloved complexity'.²⁸

More apocalyptic still is the work of Richard Misrach, whose *Violent Legacies: Three Cantos* (1992), is an examination of three places in Nevada and Utah, as the 'site map' frontispiece announces.²⁹ Misrach's spectacularly beautiful colour photographs have a descriptive and literal quality (the remains of bunkers, detonation craters, shrapnel, atomic bomb loading pits, and A-bomb assembly buildings) that places them on the border between visual archaeology and artwork. 'Project W-47' examines Wendover, Utah, a testing site for the atomic bomb late in World War II. Part II, 'The Pit', examines a dumping site for livestock that have died suddenly [30]. Misrach's close-up treatments of cattle in various states of decomposition likewise balance the nauseating corpses against the aesthetic beauty of the treatment. Seen



30 Richard Misrach

Dead Animals #324 The Pit, Nevada, 1987-9

In other pictures in this series (*Violent Legacies: Three Cantos*), Misrach offers distant views of the dumping site as well as close-up studies of the dead cattle and sheep. Here he takes the middle distance, placing the carcasses near a nondescript concrete block, with tyre tracks in the foreground, while the horizon beyond is clean, simple, vast, and clueless. The violence of death is everywhere present in this scene, despite the simplicity and elegance of the composition.

from a distance the dumping site is a region of crisscrossed dirt roads, concealing the surreal horror of the scene up close. Part III, 'The Playboys', shows the remains of a *Playboy* magazine that was used for target practice in a desert nuclear test site; the pages are riddled with bullet holes, suggesting the misogyny and dementia of the shooters and, as Misrach would have us see, the violence in American culture generally.

If Misrach's challenging, polemical images of destruction and sterility are at one extreme of contemporary landscape photography, the celebratory Sierra Club calendar images of a lushly beautiful nature stand at the other. Between the warning of the former and the promise of the latter, Americans are reminded of the discontents, raptures, and above all the responsibilities of civilization.