Landscape Notes

Landscape is one of the largest subjects in both art history generally and photography specifically. Because of this, this talk, while being wide-ranging in example, is also extremely partial in its range of themes. It fits into the series as a starting point for question 3, based on Rebecca Solnit's quote:

Using both historical and contemporary examples, discuss the attempts made by contemporary photographic artists (such as the 'New Topographics') to photograph the 'blank spots' of the landscape?

Slide 1 - John Constable – *The Haywain*

Let's start with the achingly familiar. One of the most recognizable paintings culturally, certainly in British culture. A painting that's meaning extends beyond mere art history and popular appreciation.

It is part of a long history – an art history – that speaks to the way in which artists have reflected how they, and by extension we, see our relationship with the land. As the large majority of populations in developed countries live in the urban environment, our attachment to the bucolic, the idyll, this lost paradise that more often than not takes the shape of a polite, heavily mediated, leisure site, thrives. We long for something deeper. Land reflects who we are: by conditioning, possibly by prehistoric atavism, although, as discussed later, this is far from the whole story. And in that concept lies our attachment to its representation.

As J.B. Jackson notes,

"We come into contact with nature on a tight, highly structured schedule - holidays and weekends - which is determined not by the change of seasons, but by the routines of urban work. This nature has been designed to help us absorb its 'benefits' as efficiently as possible: tourist literature and park displays ensure that we are exposed to the peak experiences at the site."

J.B. Jackson, quoted by Bright, Deborah. '*On Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography*', in The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography, Bolton, Richard (ed). (MIT Press, Cambridge 1989). p 129.

Slide 4 – Elizabeth Helsinger

To Félix Guattari in The Three Ecologies, the relationship between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ is complex, interwoven rather than in opposition. Nature is produced by culture. The 3 Ecologies: the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity (the Ecosophy), intersecting in complex ways with one-another.

Slide 5 – Keywords and Phrases

This talk will look at the concept of landscape and, using appropriate examples, demonstrate ways in which photographers have utilized this construct in relation to its associated values: the picturesque and the Sublime, pictorialism, romanticism, ideology, arcadia, the idyll, heritage, the beauty spot, the viewing point, the black spot, nationalism, primitivism, the contemporary sublime (see also technological sublime and military sublime), commerce and utility and the Non-aesthetic vision, a form of landscape unique to photography that eschews painting’s (and therefore, traditionally, photography’s) adherence or observance of romantic traditionalism.

Slide 7 – Here are some Landscapes of the Amazon

Gustav Le Gray – Elemental but constructed

August Sander – The political Angle

Henry Peach Robinson – The constructed Idyll, the romance of the sea.

P H Emerson – Bucolic documentary

Roger Fenton’s Crimea – War Photography was either heavily constructed or ‘Landscape’. In this case, perhaps both.

Francis Frith – The idea of the tour. For perhaps the first time, people who couldn’t travel could see depictions of the sites and sight of the world. Orientalism – the tribesmen, mystery, adventure. The picturesque in reference to the popular painting style of the period.

The fascination with grand landscapes whether man-made or natural. The tourist view, the orthodoxy of how we consume famous images versus the reality: the context (Cairo, the crowds, the garish t-shirts, the interrupted view).

Then, the commodification: Las Vegas, advertising imagery etc.

Advertising

We see an exploitation of baked-in attachment to the beauty spot. We visit Three Cliffs or some waterfall because we are hard-wired by cultural tradition to accept the experience as a kind of communion with nature – a birthright. As with all advertising, we buy into the idea of something lost that we might regain within the thrall of anodyne commercialism.

Slide 23 – Lake District

What we are supposed to photograph. Landscape became possibly the biggest subject for amateur photography (as it is in terms of coffee table books sold through Amazon).

To the casual observer, the idea that landscape as a subject, as an area of serious enquiry, beyond the merely aesthetic, is so easily lost. I was interested in photography. Photography magazines presented the subjects one should be interested in. It's not a direct instruction, rather a form of hegemony: we consume the landscape not because of some atavistic need, but through a cultural programming that necessitates our 'communion' with nature.

Slide 24 – JMW Turner – The Sublime

The Picturesque and the Sublime

"If, as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant conceived it, the beautiful was culture – i.e., human in scale, manageable and measurable, the sublime was associated with nature and, therefore, beyond human scale, uncontrollable and unresponsive to human desires. But … Thomas McEvilley has proposed that in our century, and perhaps for the first time, it is culture which has become the sublime, vast, terrifying and annihilating 'Other'."

Del Re, Gianmarco 'Cinema and the Sublime,'
in Contemporary Visual Arts, (1998) p.46.

"The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully is Astonishment, and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror ... o passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear, being an apprehension of pain or death, operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too ... Indeed, terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime."

Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1756) Part II, Sections I–II; ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 53–4

"[The experience of the Sublime] subverts order, coherence, a structured organisation… It bypasses the rational mind and concentrates its force directly on the emotions… Obscurity and darkness, the near loss of visual and intellectual control over one's environment."

Andrews, Malcolm 'Astonished beyond Expression – Landscape, the Sublime, and the Unpresentable,' in Landscape and Western Art, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p.132.

"The tourist who visits a picturesque spot is the consumer of a preconstituted view, one which is still given today under the name of the 'beauty spot'. It is an 'easy' pleasure. …In contrast…, the sublime is something more akin to what the Highway Code designates as a 'black spot', a representation which is a 'warning sign'. Unlike the beauty spot, the black spot is a place which is threatening, a place to be fearful which is given an aura of danger".

(Ref to Trevor Paglan's sites)

(Bate, David 'Notes on Beauty and Landscape' in Shifting Horizons; Women's Landscape Photography Now. Wells, Newton & Fehily (eds.). (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000). p. 35

"In Freudian psychoanalysis it is the ego which constantly attempts to organize the human subject, it keeps the mass of drives functioning as a coherent (if imaginary) "person". The ego is the "seat of composure", it is an agency of control. Composure of a person then, the subduing of various parts to a whole, is just like composition in a picture; it is a way of organizing and containing excitement, since adult life is mostly about containing, binding sexual excitement into sublimated forms. The pleasure derived from the composition of picturesque beauty is a pleasure in the recognition of order, precisely what the ego wants; a unity and organization of the (imaginary) coherent "self". It is as if someone says to themselves, "this order and harmony that I see in the picture is the order and harmony that I wish in myself." The organization of the picture is identified with a corresponding internalized sense of satisfaction of the ego in the human subject: 'I have finally organized everything into a unity, it is all in the right place'."

(Bate, David 'Notes on Beauty and Landscape' in Shifting Horizons; Women's Landscape Photography Now. Wells, Newton & Fehily (eds.). (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000). p. 36.

The difference between the easy and engaging picturesque landscape and the danger of the sublime – in for instance, Ingrid Pollard's Pastoral Interlude.

Slides 26, 27, 28 – The cultural reach and commodification of Caspar David Friedrich

(Reference the Peugeot ad based on The Monk by the Sea)

"The advertisement must - in one way or another - be able to speak to people who are potential customers. It has to invoke their most important dreams, desires and fears. To achieve the largest possible audience the rhetoric of the advertisement must be commonly shared in an intersubjectively valid manner. The advertisement speaks to people by attributing to cars such qualities which can solve the serious problem of the air pollution caused by traffic in particular, and consumption in general. Thus the advertisement plays on the central fears of people and gives them a sort of imaginary solution by combining modern technology with unspoilt, unpolluted and romantic landscape. It gives an answer to the paradoxical and ironical problem: how to save nature by buying a new car."

Janne Seppanen, 'Who Stole the Landscape?' in Laukkanen, et al (eds). At the Borders, Photography and Cultural Identity (Oslo: Pohjoinen Valokuua, 1991).

Slide 29 - William Henry Jackson, Timothy O'Sullivan, Carlton E. Watkins – Topographic Photographers

The utility of photography that will, one day, become art (and hugely influential on contemporary landscape photography).

Slides 31-33 – Ansel Adams/Yosemite

"Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter represented the continued taste for the picturesque sublime from nineteenth-century European and American painting. This aesthetic was premised on an identification between a mythical Eden and the American Landscape."

Deborah Bright. 'On Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into Cultural Meanings of Landscape

Photography', in The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of

Photography, Bolton, Richard (ed). (MIT Press, Cambridge 1989). p 130.

"Take the first and most famous American Eden: Yosemite. Though the parking is almost as big as the park and there are bears rooting among the McDonald's cartons, we still imagine Yosemite the way Albert Bierstadt painted it or Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams photographed it: with no trace of human presence."

Simon Schama. Landscape and Memory. (London: Fontana Press, 1996). p 7.

"With [Carleton Watkins' photographs], Yosemite began its long career as a contradiction, a place celebrated as the home of pure nature but known largely through cultural mediations - through the books of John Muir, the photographs of Watkins, Eadweard Muybridge, and in the 20th Century, Ansel Adams' photographs and the paintings of Albert Bierstadt, among many others. All these mediations taught people how to see this place and others and, by implication at least, what not to see."

Rebecca Solnit, 'Landscape and Amnesia', in Creative Camera. (Aug/Sept. 1998). p. 35.

New Topographics

Contested Landscapes; political; blackspots; the unconsidered; the ephemeral; suburbs; expansion into the Mid-West; the industrial and post-industrial.

Robert Adams
Lewis Baltz
Joe Deal
Frank Gohlke
Nicholas Nixon
Stephen Shore
Bernd and Hilla Becher
Axel Hütte
Thomas Struth
Candida Höfer
Andreas Gursky
Joel Sternfeld
Joel Meyerovitz
Len Jenshel

Mitch Epstein
John Davies
Jim Dow
Richard Misrach

British Landscape influenced by New Topography – New Colour Documentary

Slide 50 – Constructed Landscapes – The Picturesque becomes a 'reality'.

"Although the rural areas were, of course, populated, one abiding distinction between urban life and life in the countryside has been the emptiness of landscape as opposed to the bustle and crowd of the city street. 'Figures in a landscape' is a common representation of the way in which people were supposed to inhabit the countryside [Staffage]. Isolated, although not usually in a threatening way, these figures, singularly or in twos and threes, harked back to a pastoral, bucolic tradition, and could engage in peaceful contemplation among undulating pastures and parks or sublime crags and torrents. The image is one of tranquillity and repose, of oneness with a deity or at least with Nature. Nature, of course, had little to do with it when landscaping the private land of England.

At Petworth House in Sussex, Capability Brown uprooted cottages, dug lakes and raised hills in order to create just such an image of picturesque, reposeful nature."

Elizabeth Wilson 'Bodies in Public and Private' in Brettle, Jane (ed). Public Bodies / Private States:
New Views On Women and Representation (Manchester University Press, 1994) p. 6 - 7.

Images from Ingrid Pollard onward describe the contemporary sublime in which an eluded to but not explicit sense of threat endures. This leads to a military sublime in the works of Delahaye, Norfolk, and Paglen.

Slide 65 – Trevor Paglen – Military Sites

"The tourist who visits a picturesque spot is the consumer of a preconstituted view, one which is still given today under the name of the 'beauty spot'. It is an 'easy' pleasure. …In contrast…, the sublime is something more akin to what the Highway Code designates as a

‘black spot’, a representation which is a ‘warning sign’. Unlike the beauty spot, the black spot is a place which is threatening, a place to be fearful which is given an aura of danger”.

(Ref to Trevor Paglan’s sites)

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Chloe Dewe Mathews

Dewe Mathews photographed the region that had inspired the eighteen-year-old author, exploring miles of underground corridors and vast melting glaciers that seemed to offer parallels between Shelley's prophetic socio-environmental concerns and the anxieties of our time. In Search of Frankenstein presents a contemporary sublime, which affords this monumental piece of literature fresh resonance, two hundred years after it was first published.

Artist’s Website

Slide 45 – Stephen Gill - Coexistance

Coexistence In the summer of 2010 I was asked if I would be interested in making a photographic response to an area containing a pond situated within an industrial wasteland the remains of the deceased steelmaking industry in Dudelange, Luxembourg. My only previous experience with ponds had been during my teenage years, when an obsession with pond life led me to spend long hours in my bedroom wearing a lab coat and peering into a microscope. That obsessive immersion into a strange and disorientating world had a profound effect on me personally, and certainly left its mark on many of the photographic studies I have subsequently produced. I knew that the pond in Dudelange would be teeming with unseen life now that its industrial past had come to an end. From the 1920s until it was put out of use in 2006 the pond had been used to cool the blast furnaces, and tiny but dense communities would be now forming and thriving in the absence of that extreme heat. For the eight months leading up to my first visit to the territory, my mind increasingly started tuning into microscopic worlds within worlds, and I became ever more aware of the many parallels between patterns and processes in the pond and those in our own lives as individual humans within societies. Slowly I became

committed to the idea of attempting to bring these two apparently disparate worlds so physically close yet so different in scale visually closer together. Grappling with the idea of knitting together these parts of life that coexist but dont belong together nor are ever usually seen together, I decided to make a photographic study that would resemble a kind of tapestry. The University of Luxembourg kindly taught me to use one of their medical microscopes so that I was able to study single drops of the water, and I began searching the pond for diatoms and other minuscule creatures and plant life. The more I thought about the human factor that was so essential to the series forming in my head, the more I wanted to involve local people from the small town of Dudelange, which has a substantial community of families with Portuguese and Italian origins. Many of these people used to work in the steelmaking industry. For health and safety reasons it was not possible to invite people to come to the cooling ponds, so I decided instead to take the pond to the people. I filled a red plastic mop bucket with water from the pond, and dipped my underwater camera into this pond water prior to making portraits of the Dudelange residents. Later on I also dipped the prints into the pond itself, so microscopic life was also transferred onto the surface of the paper.

Stephen Gill

Gursky:

“Photography is no longer credible” . . . “A Fictitious construction [is now] required to provide an accurate image of a modern [subject].”

Mishka Henner’s Contemporary Sublime.

Mishka Henner - Interview

What first sparked your fascination with England's landscape and industrial heritage?

Mainly because it was there, I was in it and I could touch it. How this particular landscape around me is changing, diversely and inexorably, is fascinating. The industrial nature of these regions has of course shaped the dynamics of the landscape physically, culturally, ecologically, ideologically, socially etc., and this is something I attempt to understand and examine. It’s become a mechanism to imagine and speculate on our new degree of existence, connections and relationships to the broader world, how the recent industrial past feeds into a more globalised stage.

That’s why I became obsessed with oil fields and the idea of even looking for oil fields. In effect, if you think of the world now as a single image that’s been photographed from every angle, from satellites to street view cameras…

MH: Well, if you dig really deep down there’s my outrage. I’m pretty outraged about the stuff I see around me. I have strong reactions to it all. And I try to articulate that in such a way that isn’t a rant. If you look at the other work in the Prix Pictet, this is probably the loudest. I think of the image with the red lagoon, and it’s almost like Munch’s scream. Only it’s my scream.

JB: Right.

MH: It’s like a gunshot wound. Or a decapitation. It’s pretty horrific. It’s a pretty strong articulation of my outrage. I really liked what Ed Ruscha said once, that all he wanted to do was photograph the facts. He just wanted to see if it was possible, with his gasoline stations and parking lots and all the rest of it.

JB: Of course.

MH: He wanted to photograph them as facts. I know that’s not fashionable, and there’s been 40 years of photographic critical theory that’s gone against the idea that photographs can in any way be factual, but I like that.

That’s why I love appropriation. It’s using what’s already there. Reframing it changes everything and that can be enough.

Interview with Theo Simpson, Grafik Magazine, 13/10/17 (grafik.net)