

Research in Context Essay

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Figure 1

Ansel Adams (1938) *Cathedral Peak and Lake*. Taken from The Ansel Adams Gallery (2025) *Cathedral Peak and Lake*. Available at: <https://articles.anseladams.com/cathedralpeakandlake-about/> (Accessed: 23 November 2025).

Figure 2

Ansel Adams (1941) *Moonrise Over Hernandez*. Taken from Ansel Adams original photograph – black & white photography (no date) *The Ansel Adams Gallery*. Available at: <https://www.anseladams.com/collections/original-photographs-by-ansel-adams> (Accessed: 24 November 2025).

Figure 3

Ansel Adams (1941) *Moonrise Over Hernandez*. Taken from Mcardle, J. (2017) ‘November 1: Recount’, *On This Date in Photography*. Available at: <https://onthisdateinphotography.com/2017/11/01/27190/> (Accessed: 24 November 2025).

Figure 4

Stephen Shore (1972) *Mineral Wells, Texas, June 1972*. Taken from ‘Stephen Shore’s iconic road trip photographs shaped the way we take pictures now’, *ARTnews.com*. Available at: <https://www.artnews.com/feature/stephen-shore-american-surfaces-1202688481/> (Accessed: 10 November 2025).

Figure 5

Stephen Shore U.S. 93, Wikieup, Arizona, December 14, 1976. Taken from *MoMA*. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/165378> (Accessed: 24 November 2025).

Rebecca Solnit (2008) argues the work of Ansel Adams created a chequerboard of scenic wonders and blank spots. Solnit refers to blank spots as the human intervention into the landscape, which includes homes, industrial buildings, roads, railways mining and any human interference with the natural world. This essay sets out to discuss the merits of creating picturesque images of the natural world whilst arguing including human impact offers viewers more realistic and culturally important images. Comparing the work of Ansel Adams to that of Stephen Shore, it will make the argument in favour of Shore's method of documenting the world.

Whilst Adams chose to exclude manmade objects from his photographs, they do exist. It could be argued that this approach gives a disingenuous view of the area in which Adams worked, primarily in the national parks of the American Mid West. This essay will analyse some of Adam's work, as well as his philosophies, regarding his practice. Furthermore, it will analyse the work of Stephen Shore, who not only included the blank spots but in some cases made the blank spots the focus of the image. Whilst the work of Adams has validity and will appeal to many people, there is an argument in favour of photography facilitating a deeper connection with the viewer. A body of work, it could be argued should offer the viewer an insight into cultural identities and societal changes.

Ansel Adams is often referred to as the greatest landscape photographer. This is certainly the view of Dan and Scott Marengo (2020) who in their glowing review state his epic angles and range of light elevates his work to fine art. There is room for discussion as to what the greatest actually means. It could be based on technical ability, financial reward,

influence or notoriety. Jordan Anthony (2023) described Adams as probably the most famous landscape photographer of all time.

Whilst Adams legacy remains indisputable among some landscape photographers, curators and collectors, the nature of that legacy remains in contention among contemporary photography artists and photography theorists (Dennis, 2015). Adams developed a love of landscape photography after his interactions as a boy with the wilderness of Yosemite National Park. However, there is a dichotomy in his relationship with the park. Whilst he loved being in touch with nature, he simultaneously enjoyed the comforts provided by manmade intervention within the park. Adams love of the outdoors lead him to settle as a permanent resident in Yosemite. The human intervention that he chose to exclude from his images actually provided him with all of the comforts of daily life (McWenie, 2004). Adams, a self confessed environmentalist, was not opposed to taking commissions from major corporations responsible for destruction of the environment, to fund his landscape work (Dennis, 2015).

In order to understand why Adams made images that deliberately excluded man's intervention in the natural world, his philosophy must be understood. Adams considered himself an environmentalist who believed passionately in preserving as much of the natural world as possible. His membership of the Sierra club is well documented and his first published writings and photographs were published in the Sierra Club Bulletin (McWenie, 2004). He was opposed to the expansion of industry and cities into the rural areas and said, "You don't improve nature. You reveal your impression of nature or nature's impact on you" (Adams, n.d.). Moreover, Adams showed the landscape as he

wanted to see it rather than how it actually was. Nathan Lyons (1966, p.29.) quotes Adams as saying, “A great photograph is one that fully expresses what one feels, in the deepest sense, about what is being photographed”. On a more spiritual note, in the book, *This is the American Earth* (Adams and Newall 1960, p.106.), the text quotes, “You shall top a rise and behold creation. And you shall need the tongues of angels to tell you what you have seen” suggesting it is beyond human comprehension. Adams chose to show only a small part of Yosemite National Park in his work, the part that was untouched by human hands. He created a specific way of seeing the park and nature as a whole, as being completely divorced from human intervention (McWenie, 2004).



Figure 1

Considering Cathedral Peak and Lake, an image made by Adams in 1938, it seems an aesthetically pleasing image completely devoid of manmade structures or people. The photograph shows a majestic view of the High Sierra Mountains with the peak standing proudly above the lake. Pine trees surround the base of the mountain while the cloud formation adds drama to the image. Adams uses classic composition techniques with the peak being on a third line and a rock formation provides foreground interest. There is a spiritual feel to the image as Adams shows the magnificence and glory of the scene and of nature in general. The fact that he had access to nature untouched by humans gives an insight into his methodology, expressing the excitement he felt witnessing the scene. The original print was made by Adams using tonal range to present an idealised representation of the scene. Shooting in black and white, Adams is able to enhance the shadows and manipulate reality placing the viewer closer to the scene (Luntz, 2025).



Figure 2

Ansel Adams was not opposed to portraying the landscape as he thought it should be, rather than the way it actually was (Dennis, 2015). This can be seen not only in his image making but also in the way he described his process, particularly regarding his 1941 image, *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*. Whilst not one of his Yosemite photographs, it is one of his best known images. Mary Street Alinder (1996) in her biography of Adams describes *Moonrise* as one of the greatest photographs ever made. *Moonrise* was made as part of a commission for the U.S. Department of the Interior, glorifying the American wilderness. Once again there is a dichotomy as Adams took commissions from Standard Oil and U.S. Potash to help fund the trip. Ironically, Adams was providing images of the west for both corporate exploitation and government preservation (Dennis, 2015). The image, Adams claims was taken just before sunset with the moon already in the sky. It shows a small settlement in the foreground with the setting sun reflecting off the crosses in the foreground. Behind them there is a mountain range with a dramatic cloud formation just above it. Above the clouds there is the moon in the dark sky. Adams is reported to have made more than 1000 prints from the negative and the prints change significantly over time. Original prints have a more daylight look to them with cloud detail across the entire sky. The post 1960's prints have had the contrast increased to create an ink black sky, creating a night scene. In addition, he burned the foreground in the darkroom to show more detail in the chaparral and the crosses (ibid.). This shows the change in Adams view of the scene, and his desire to portray the landscape as he thought it should be and the way he wanted viewers to perceive it. Some might argue that he was merely resting on his laurels. When Stephen Shore met Adams at a dinner in the 1970s he claimed Adams said

that he had had a creative streak in the 1940s and had been pot boiling ever since (Soth, n.d.).

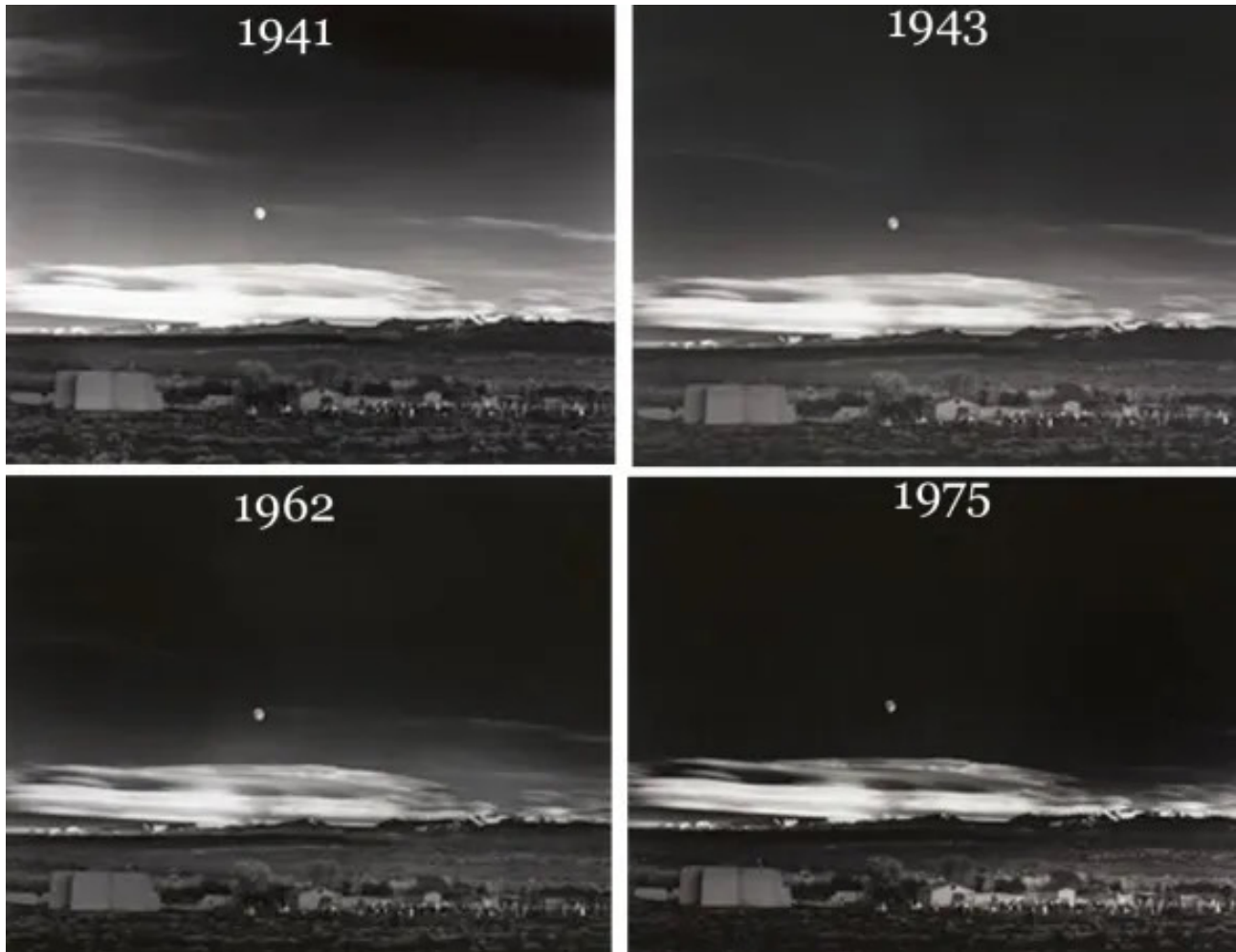


Figure 3

During the latter part of the 20th century, a new style of photography began to emerge. It could be argued this new style took a more honest approach to landscape photography, filling in the blank spots left out of Adams work. These photographers placed emphasis on the built environment rather than the natural landscape. Whilst this was not a movement as such, an exhibition of this style of photography was presented in 1975 by curator William Jenkins called New Topographics - Photographs of a Man Altered Landscape.

Since then, the term new topographic has been associated with this style of photography. What was both novel and challenging about the exhibition, was not only the subject matter, but also the sense of responsibility presented to the viewer. By placing human presence front and centre rather than eliminating it, viewers were challenged to take responsibility for the future of the landscape and the environmental impact of human intervention (Mickevicius, 2020). Unlike previous landscape photographers that portrayed nature as pure and untouched by human hands, the New Topographics showed the landscape as scarred by the effects of capitalism. They showed viewers parking lots, roads, filling stations and other signs of the American addiction to automotive mobility (Dunaway, 2012). The exhibition presented ecological issues, related to the consequences of industry and construction, raised in a gallery within the discourse of art (Cotton, 2014). It could be argued, deadpan images, images devoid of overt emotion, have a more democratic approach to their subject giving equal emphasis and importance to the scene regardless of the subject being photographed. "Deadpan photography has a great capacity for capturing the wonder of the man-made world in an elegant manner" (ibid., p.93).

One of the ten photographers whose work was exhibited in the original New Topographics exhibition was Stephen Shore. Shore transforms the banal, and highlights the often overlooked placing them into cultural memory. Rather than photographing traditionally beautiful scenes, he instead he turned his camera towards gas stations, motels, intersections and diners. His work documents how Americans actually lived at the time (Mickevicius, 2020). Central to Shore's methodology, was the use of colour, which at the time was met with criticism. Several photographers thought of colour as being vulgar and

best left to the advertising world (O'Hagan, 2015). Colour, it could be argued, increased and enhanced the reality of his photographs and filled in more of the blank spots. Shore concluded that colour added an additional layer of decorative information. He said, "The world I was looking at was in colour, and colour seemed integral to the meaning" (Shore, 2007, p.18).

Arguably there is nothing dramatic in Shore's work, it simply shows the desire to celebrate the deep beauty in things as they are. Moreover, it appears a guiding principle in his work is his use of natural light and his refusal to create an effect for aesthetic reasons (Bejac, 2017). He set out to show the American landscape with neutrality and clarity. This however was not the view of Deborah Bright (2021) who criticised the New Topographics for hiding the corporate dominance of the social and physical environment. Bright further concluded the photographers failed to give their images historical context and clear social critique. She claimed the images were mere art objects which failed to convey the social concerns the photographers may have intended.

Unlike Adams, Shore aimed for a more descriptive style in his images (Campany, 2013). He believed that photographs should not be overly expansive or dramatic but should reveal the reality of the world (Shore, 2007). Furthermore, he believed that each subject was worthy of artistic attention. He argued that the man altered landscape was culturally and visually meaningful. "I began to photograph the everyday, not because it was banal, but because it was rich with meaning" (Shore, 2014, p.197).



Figure 4

Mineral Well, Texas is a photograph taken by Shore in 1972 as part of American Surfaces.

Some might argue the image captures a typical everyday, uninteresting scene.

Nevertheless, the image is filled with cultural significance. It tells a story of American commercialisation and consumerism. The image also speaks of the romanticism and

freedom of car ownership at the time. The fact that there are no other vehicles in the

image tell of a time when driving was easy and unrestricted. The subject, framing and the use of colour challenge the traditional view of landscape photography. The framing gives

the viewer the of feeling of being a part of the scene rather than viewing from above. This

is contrary to the elevated view in Ansel Adams work. It could be argued that this

represents a cultural shift in the 1970s. There are no people in the image, which gives a further clue to the sleepy nature of the town. The viewer might also assume that economic activity is somewhat subdued. There are no cars or people rushing to get to places to do important things. The image captures an ordinary street scene, the discourse is more documentary than picturesque. This image shows the man altered landscape and human activity. The photograph is also a social commentary, it reflects a moment in time of road culture. The picture shows a time of shifting economic patterns in 1970s small time America. This image shows the viewer that suburban, infrastructural scenes are worthy of aesthetic and cultural attention.



Figure 5

U.S. 93 Wikieup, Arizona, an image made by Shore in 1976 is an image that typifies the work of the artist. The picture beautifully fills in the blanks, the presence of man within the natural landscape. This photograph does exactly what Adams chose not to do, whilst showing the viewer the natural landscape it also shows that humans are not only present but live in harmony with nature. The mountains in the background and the cloud formations show clearly the majesty of nature and the vastness of the open, undeveloped space. Nevertheless, even in this rural setting there is evidence of human activity. The fence, the telegraph pole and the phone box are permanent structures, while the car speaks of a visitor stopping briefly to use the facilities. The cactus and the sandy parking area give the impression of a rural setting. It is possible that this area may even be a rest stop for people on their way to enjoy a holiday in an area of natural beauty. The discourse of this image is both art and documentary. Unlike a traditional landscape image, this picture preserves a moment in time and gives us an insight into the culture of the time. In *Uncommon places* (Shore, 2014) Shore talks about time and how appears in a photograph. In some images time appears to be frozen and the viewer feels this moment. Moreover whilst no humans are visible in the image, their presence is implied by objects in the scene.

In conclusion this essay acknowledges the motivations, the methodology and the sheer beauty of Adams work. Adams was a very well respected landscape photographer although there were some ironies in both his associations with, and his outlook on the natural world he professed to revere. Adams shows the viewer the beauty of nature, however it offers no more than a pleasing scene. That scene will be the same no matter

how many times the area is visited. By contrast, the work of Stephen Shore in particular, and photographers that include human intervention in their images, give a greater insight into the world as it is. By including human influences on the landscape, Shore accepts that humans are part of the landscape and celebrates the fact, as Shore's images capture a moment in time. They give an insight into the culture of the time and preserve a scene which will change over time. It therefore can be argued Shore challenges the viewer to take responsibility for their part in reshaping the landscape in a way that Adams never did. Therefore whilst there is still a place for Adams work as aesthetically pleasing images, Shore's work emotionally connects the viewer, not only to cultural history but also to the impact of human activity.

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