

Name: William Steadman

Student Number: 2205239

Tutor: Paul Duerinckx

Module: Research in Context

Capturing 'Blank Spots': Exposing the True Nature of Landscapes



Illustrations:

“Thunderstorm” - Ansel Adams, 1949

“Drought Abandoned House” - Dorothea Lange, 1938

“Stumpy Valley” - Dorothea Lange, 1939

“Photograph of an overseer and child workers in the Yazoo City Yarn Mills” - Lewis Hine, 1911

“Newly occupied tract houses, Col'ado” - Robert Adams, 1968

“Model Home, Shadow Mountain” - Lewis Baltz, 1977

“Silver Lake Operations #2” - Edward Burtynsky, 2007

“Waiting” - Richard Misrach, 1983

“Chongqing XI” - Nadav Kander, 2007

“The Balloon Seller” - Simon Norfolk, 2001

“Softball Stadium” - Richard Mosse, 2016

“Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility” - Taryn Simon, 2007

Landscape photography has evolved significantly throughout the years following its conception. It has undergone changes reflecting both artistic trends as well as the adaptation of a wider cultural outlook towards the natural world. Rebecca Solnit's observation on how Ansel Adams and the creation of nature photography lays the foundation for critical inquiry into the 'blank spots' of a landscape. The aim of this essay is to explore the attempts of various contemporary photographers, such as those affiliated with movements like the New Topographics, in order to bring light to commonly overlooked or intentionally excluded aspects of the landscape. Using a range of historical context and modern examples, this essay will inquire into the methods, motivations and impact of these artists who aim to reveal the unseen intricacies of a seemingly pristine landscape.



One photographer who was a pivotal figure in encapsulating the less than appealing characteristics of the American Landscape was Dorothea Lange. During the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s, her practice focused on the devastating impact of the great depression and the environmental damage to rural areas. She presented a stark contrast to the enduring romanticised idea of American prosperity and according to Linda Gordon, Lange's work during this era acted as an important demonstration of the less glamorous aspects of the American landscape; it revealed the struggle that individuals and communities were faced with during this time of economic and environmental crisis (Gordon, 2009). By deliberately

bringing attention to these aesthetically unfavourable aspects of the American landscape through works such as “drought-abandoned house” and “stumpy valley,” Lange prompted inquiry to the unseen, to characteristics of the terrain that had previously been largely unconsidered.



Another historical example of a photographer is Lewis Hine, renowned for his impactful documentary photography that focused on social issues in the early 20th century. More specifically child labour and its consequences. While Hine is not primarily known for a landscape photography in the traditional sense, if the interpretation of ‘landscape’ is considered in a broader sense, correlation can be made. His work often includes industrial landscapes, factories and other urban environments and demonstrates the human altered spaces that were critical to industrialisation of the time. This way of working brought light to these societal ‘blank spots’ that were often overlooked by the masses. One example of Hine turning focus towards these unnoticed sites was during his second trip to Vermont. This area was largely perceived by the American population as primarily a rural state, consisting of insignificant pockets of industry scattered throughout, defined mainly by its farms, fields, and forests rather than industrial aspects (Macieski, 2015). Hine successfully brought attention to the ‘blank spots’ of this area, America, and the wider world. Photographers at the time, as well as society in general, tended to overlook these small pockets of industrialisation because they do not fall under traditional standards of aesthetics, and they exposed the cruel reality of child labour.



The New Topographics movement emerged in the 1970s as a response to the prevailing trends in Landscape photography. This movement was led by photographers such as Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz. It sought to redefine the visual language used to depict the American landscape. This movement is a pivotal example of the exploration of 'blank spots' within the environment. Rather than romanticising untouched nature or iconic landmarks as many photographers did and still do, the New Topographics focused on the manufactured environment and human altered landscapes. The images they produced often depicted industrial sites as well as suburban and infrastructure developments, challenging traditional ideals of scenic beauty. For instance, Robert Adams in his series "The New West," documents the evolving urban and suburban landscapes of the American West. As Eric Sandeen puts it in an essay written about Adams, "Human action in these suburban tracts erases the regional past held in the landscape, rather than drawing from it" (Sandeen, 2009, p97-116). This quote aligns with Adams' exploration of the impact of human intervention on the Western Landscape. He purposely avoids portraying the iconic landscapes of the American West, instead focusing on the ordinary aspects of the changing Western environment that have been claimed from nature. Lewis Baltz, as mentioned was another member of the 'New Topographic' movement.



Another Member of the 'New Topographics' movement was Lewis Baltz. In his "Nevada" series, he focuses on the desolate and often overlooked spaces within the Nevada landscape. He offered a stark and critical commentary on the impact of human activities in this environment and paved the way for many other photographers to consider the ethical considerations of how they portray the landscape. David Stentiford in his article, "Broken Light: Urbanization, Waste, and Violence in Lewis Baltz's Nevada Portfolios," explains how David Hickey, art critic, tells us that many photographers moving forward were "informed by the suspicion that the way we represent the landscape is somehow complicit in our exploitation of it" (Hickey, 1999, p23-25) (Stentiford, 2014). This quote encourages an exploration of the ethical dimensions of landscape photography. It prompts consideration of the responsibility that photographers bear in shaping perceptions of the environment and whether these representations contribute to a more holistic understanding of the landscape, including its 'blank spots.' It invites reflection on how photographic choices may reinforce or disrupt patterns of exploitation and neglect in our relationship with the natural world.



Contemporary photographic artists continue to explore and document the so called 'blank spots' in the landscape; they capture the areas often overlooked or intentionally excluded from traditional notions of scenic beauty. These photographers challenge the conventional way of practicing landscape photography and address issues such as degradation of the environment, urbanisation, and the impact of human activity on the world. One such example is Edward Burtynsky, who is known for his large-scale images that encapsulate the impact of industrialisation on the environment. Burtynsky's visual exploration of industrial landscapes in his seminal work "Manufactured Landscape" offers a stark portrayal of human impact on the environment, challenging viewers to confront the often-neglected aspects of industrialisation on landscapes, urging contemplation on the consequences of human development (Burtynsky 2003). Burtynsky is deliberately capturing what nature photography inherently attempts to avoid. These large industrial environments could be seen as 'blank spots' as they are generally avoided in the name of beauty and formality. Despite this, Burtynsky achieves a "disturbing visual beauty" (Kane, 2019, p129) through his ability to balance aesthetics with environmental narrative, thus confronting viewers on their own lifestyles on the planet.



Richard Misrach in his series “Desert Cantos” aims to explore the American desert landscape in a similar context. His work highlights both its beauty, as well as traces of human intervention such as military testing sites, border patrol installations and other elements that disrupt the pristine environment of the desert. Within this series, Misrach captures the paradoxical beauty that this human intervention beholds in the American desert, challenging traditional perceptions and prompting reflection on the human altered landscape (Misrach, 1987). Steven Hoelscher references, within an article, Rebecca Solnit: “the tremendous beauty of Misrach’s photographs and their complex political implications aren’t congruous,” this enforces Hoelscher’s idea that “(Misrach) upends customary understandings of what traditional landscape photographs are supposed to look like” (Solnit, 1990, p30-35) (Hoelscher, 2017, p451-488). This point could suggest that despite the deliberate inclusion of the grim content found within these ‘blank spots,’ these images still maintain certain qualities that contribute to an aesthetically pleasing result. “...he is enmeshed in a contest over the land in which representation and usage, military and aesthetic, apocalyptic and environmental discourses converge” (Beck, 2000, p156-166), this quote reinforces the notion of the juxtaposition between human intervention and the natural environment.



Another example of a contemporary photographer who focuses on the relationship between humanity and the environment is Nadav Kander, in his series “Yangtze, The Long River.” This photographic series attempts to capture the socio-environmental changes along China’s Yangtze River, an industrial blank spot, undesirable and inaesthetic in the traditional sense of the word. In Kathryn Kramer’s article “Up the River,” she claims that “in various statements and interviews about this project, Kander implies he trumps the quaint picturesque with the awful sublime” (Kramer, 2013, p30-31). This phrase suggests that Kander, through his artistic depictions, dictates a deliberate departure from conventional picturesque representations of landscapes. The term “quaint picturesque” refers to the idyllic and charming scenes, most associated with classical landscape aesthetics. In stark contrast to this, “the awful sublime” suggests a shift towards a more awe-inspiring, yet unsettling representation of the natural world, and how it is irreversibly changing. Within this project, Kander aligns with a broader movement in contemporary photography that aims to document the environmental consequences of human activities. This series aligns with the exploration of ‘blank spots’ by shedding light on areas often omitted from traditional representations of landscapes. China, a country so fast moving, rapid and profound, Kander explains that the photographs he has taken can never be repeated, as the speed of which industrialisation spreads in the area has a direct and irreversible effect on the landscape. The notion of the

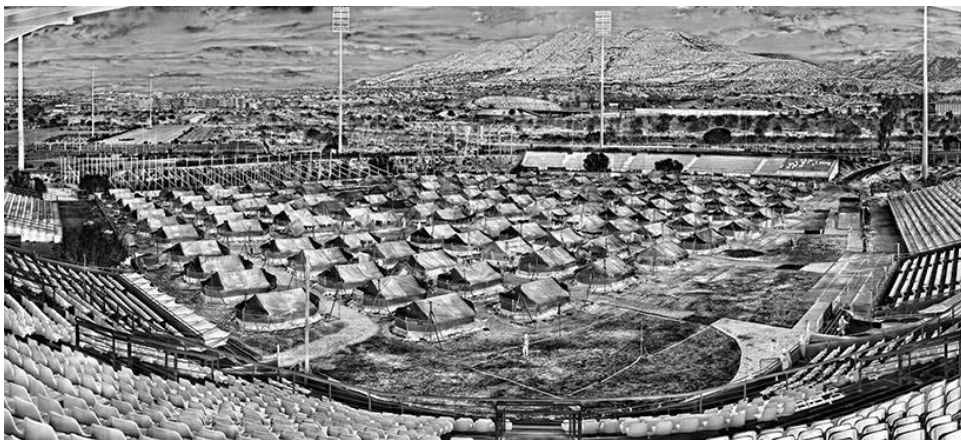
'blank spot' will be reduced to nothing but an image in the mind's eye, an individual memory and interpretation lost in time.



One contemporary photographer who documents the landscape's 'blank spots,' in his "Afghanistan Chronotopia" series, is Simon Norfolk. This project is a powerful example of how photography can document landscapes altered by conflict and human intervention. A quote from Norfolk's website "Seeing Afghanistan as a chronotope can reconnect the evidence in the landscape to the story of this human disaster" (Norfolk, No Date). The notion of "reconnecting the evidence in the landscape" emphasises Norfolk's objective of visually linking the visible traces of conflict with the broader narrative of human disaster. By doing so, Norfolk aims to provide a visual context that goes beyond the immediate, inviting viewers to engage with the landscape as a repository of historical and human experiences.

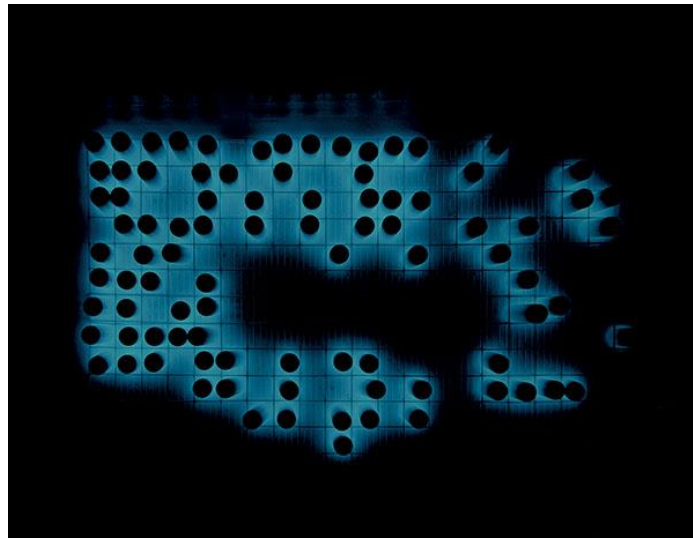


A photographer who conducts a similar practice within the field of war photography is Richard Mosse. His image “Softball Stadium,” included in his “Heat Maps,” depicts a refugee camp within the Hellinikon Olympic Complex in Athens. A quote from Gabrielle Moser’s article “Race, Climate Change and the Photographic Negative in Richard Mosse’s Heat Maps” explains that “It is from (a) removed perspective that many of Mosse’s images deliver their formal punch, revealing the visual irony of the location of many of the camps: the bitter reversal of the Olympic Stadium in Athens now housing not the spectacle of international cooperation and national strength, but the failures of global policy and Western humanism.” This describes how Mosse has shown a critical engagement with the landscape within this image, by highlighting the discrepancy between the intended purpose of certain sites and their current reality. This challenges traditional representations of landscapes as it goes beyond capturing the picturesque and confronts viewers with the altered, complex, and often troubling aspects of the environment.



Taryn Simon is another example of a photographer who delves into the notion of ‘black spots’ within her photographic series “An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar.” Within this series she investigates the concealed, overlooked aspects of American culture and infrastructure. Her images provide an insight into places that are commonly elusive to the public eye, and they present viewers with the opportunity to confront the obscured or unnoticed aspects of modern society. From the quote “Taryn Simon invites the viewer to contemplate the unseen, peripheral spaces in order to fully comprehend their relationship to

the pedestrian and the everyday" (Simon, 2010, p81-88), it can be derived that her work encourages viewers to reflect, and it emphasises the goal of comprehending the relationship between peripheral spaces and the everyday experience. It shows that by focusing on these 'blank spots,' viewers gain a deeper understanding of how these spaces interact with the usual aspects of daily life, and that the landscape is a complex tapestry where even the most overlooked areas play a role in shaping our lived experience.



In conclusion, the evolution of landscape photography reveals a dynamic interaction between artistic trends and the changing cultural perspectives on the natural world. Solnit's insights into Ansel Adam's contribution to nature photography serve as a foundational premise for examining the 'blank spots' within landscapes. This essay has successfully explored the endeavours of contemporary photographers within this context and has shown their likeness to movements such as "The New Topographics," which bring attention to the often neglected, or intentionally excluded aspects of the environment. Providing historical context through the research of Dorothea Lange's documentation of the Dust Bowl era and Lewis Hine's work on industrial landscapes, has provided critical perspectives on the less than glamorous aspects of the American landscape. The exploration of "The new Topographic" movement, specifically Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz's work within it, has

given insight into the opposition to traditional scenic ideals through the highlighting of human-altered landscapes. This essay has also discussed more recent photographers such as Richard Misrach, Nadav Kander and Simon Norfolk, who continue to explore 'blank spots' by capturing the overlooked consequences of human interaction with the environment, and showed how their work also challenges traditional aesthetic ideals by confronting viewers with the unsettling juxtaposition of human intervention and the natural environment. This essay has also delved into the critical perspectives of Taryn Simon, who emphasises the contemplation of the unseen. Her approach invites the viewer to comprehend the intricate relationship between these peripheral areas and everyday life.

Ultimately, contemporary photographers like Edward Burtynsky, Richard Misrach, Nadav Kander, and Taryn Simon exemplify a continued exploration of 'blank spots' in the landscape. Their deliberate choices challenge traditional aesthetics, ethical considerations, and the broader societal perception of the environment. By capturing the often neglected, they contribute to a comprehensive dialogue on the complex relationships between humanity and the landscapes we inhabit.

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