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?

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 polite, heavily mediated, leisure sites, thrives. We long for something deeper. Land reflects who we are: by conditioning, possibly by prehistoric atavism. 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.

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.

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 romanticism.

Landscape of conflict

Photographers of what could be termed the 'landscape of conflict' play on the paradoxical nature of this form of representation. The beauty of the desert and mountains juxtaposed with the terrible content depicted, often after the event.

Claude Lorrain (& Nicolas Poussin)

Their paintings influenced wealthy landowners in the 18th century to commission landscapers such as Lancelot Capability Brown to reconfigure the landscapes of their estates. This is a kind of reverse representation in which a representation of a landscape becomes the actual landscape.

Lorrain's paintings were already **virtual** - constructions with only a passing resemblance to the 'real' land - with the antiquity of the ancient world co-opted for purpose, along with elements suggesting Biblical stories, and standard types such as shepherd boys with their flocks etc.

The layering of intentional ruins and waterfalls reflecting natural processes and the passage of vast time as a comment on mans' folly reflecting romantic sensibilities.

You can see a taste of this in Penllergare Woods, fashioned by the Dillwyn Llewelyn family in the 19th century.

Dutch painters of the 17th and 18th century were similarly influenced by the antiquity of the ancient world but tended to paint more realistic scenes of pastoral life – not weighted with symbolism – and this influenced John Constable and later Henry Peach Robinson and Emerson in their representations of pastoral life.

The conceptual value of the ruin is seen in Simon Norfolk's landscapes of war-ravaged zones.

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 can regain.

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)

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.

"Landscapes only become such when they are both made and noticed, acted or lived or thought with some degree of consciousness. They require our participation to be landscapes. Without this, the tree falls unheeded in the forest."

Elizabeth Helsinger, Landscape Theory - Art Seminars (London: Routledge, 2008). p.323.

"The notion of landscape… 'implies a division between the self and the land'. The land becomes a surface against which the self poses itself, and a screen (psychological, cinematic and televisual) against which it projects its fears and desires, and from which it gains pleasure. Landscape separates subject and object."

Rod Giblet and Juha Tolonen, Photography and Landscape (Bristol: Intellect Press, 2012). p. 55

'The landscape' is, as Wolfgang Sachs puts it, 'the construct of a society that no longer has an unmediated relationship with the soil'. The concept of landscape encodes, measures and reproduces the viewer's alienation from nature. Landscape measures our distance from land.

Rod Giblet and Juha Tolonen, Photography and Landscape (Bristol: Intellect Press, 2012). p. 55.

"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. 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.

"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."

"Yosemite Valley had, during his (Ansel Adams) decades of photographing it as wilderness, a golf course, a luxury hotel, several camp sites, stores, a school, churches, and even a beauty parlour. Adams cropped it out in the name of Beauty, of formalism, of composition, but all his heirs learned to leave it out too and thus was nature photography created. And what he cropped-out, his fellow Americans learned not to see, leaving the American landscape as a checker-board of scenic wonders and blank spots."

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

(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).

Gursky:

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

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

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

A List of New Topographic Photographers (and photographers influenced by the New Topographic movement) to look at:

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

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

With regard to Gursky and Henner et al, in the digital realm, landscape, always a construction, emerges from the yoke of straight photography to become whatever we decide to make it.