

Simon Fudge 1904006

Photography in the Arts

Contextual Studies ADAD5003

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Lecturer, Paul Duerinckx

“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 chequerboard of scenic wonders and blank spots.” Rebecca Solnit, *Landscape and Amnesia*, in *Creative Camera* (Aug/Sept. 1998). p. 35 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?”

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It seems as if Rebecca Solnit is making a criticism of Adams work on the basis that it is a fabrication in that it does not represent her idea of reality. Grundberg (1990, p.31) describes Adams as the 'best known and most widely admired photographer in the United States'. But

on the face of it, for Solnit, she apparently challenges what his photography should be about and what it should contain.

Adams provides an insight into his philosophy

A great photograph is one that fully expresses what one feels, in the deepest sense, about what is being photographed, and is, thereby, a true manifestation of what one feels about life in its entirety.

Adams, (1979), quoted in Schaefer, (1992, p.3).

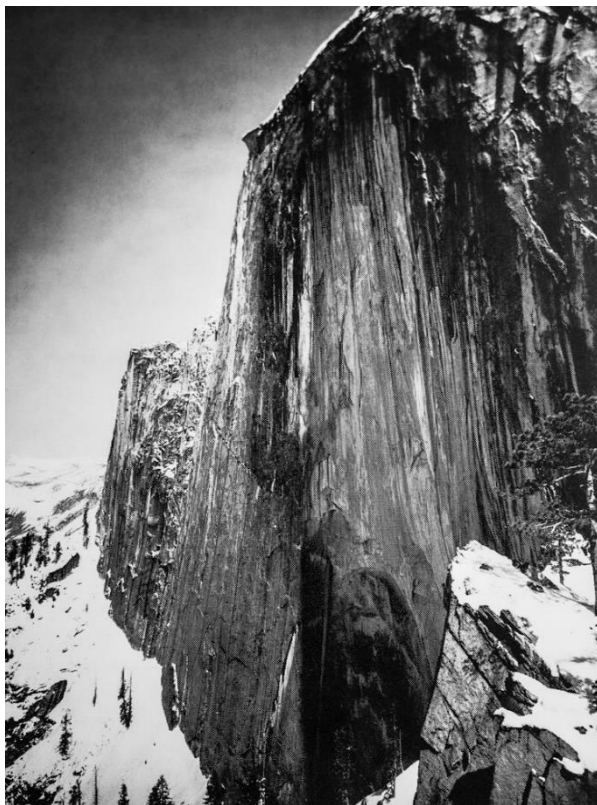


Fig. 1



Fig.2

In 1932 Adams, along with Edward Weston and several other west coast photographers formed the f/64 group. According to Hostetler (2004) the group was brought together with the intentions of a new way of creating and to move away from the prevailing pictorialist approach. The name f/64 group was chosen because at that aperture with a large format camera, much of the scene is capable of being rendered in sharp focus. She describes how it was the group's aims to see the world as it really is and to record in accurate detail.

It is therefore interesting and ironic that Solnit would choose to point out that Adams evades a reality.

Baudrillard, J. (1994, p.12) describes how Disneyland fabricates a reality in order to seek to convince us that the rest is real. But in fact, he points out that it is the rest that is a simulation of the real; a capitalist means to distract us from a reality.

Is the composed exclusions of the trappings of modern infrastructure and consumerism creating a hyperreality that in truth does not exist? Is Solnit suggesting that Adam's portrayal of Yosemite Valley is a simulation? In contemplating Adam's work, Grundberg, A. (1990, p.32) states "...it shows us a natural world so precisely ordered and so cleansed of ills that we might suspect it had been sanitised by cosmic disinfecting."

But what is wrong with an image that fails to tell the truth? Why should photography be subjected to this moral scrutiny when other art forms so clearly are not. Grundberg (p.111) suggests that the authenticity of photography is linked to the photographic industry and the historical marketing of the reproductive quality.

Fontcuberta (2014) explores the question of the photograph as a document or as a fiction and suggests that one of the first images to be created by a camera, by Louis Daguerre in 1838 is probably a kind of fabrication. Fontcuberta argues that the two figures in the foreground were likely to have been stationary actors, otherwise they would not appear due to the required lengthy exposure times.

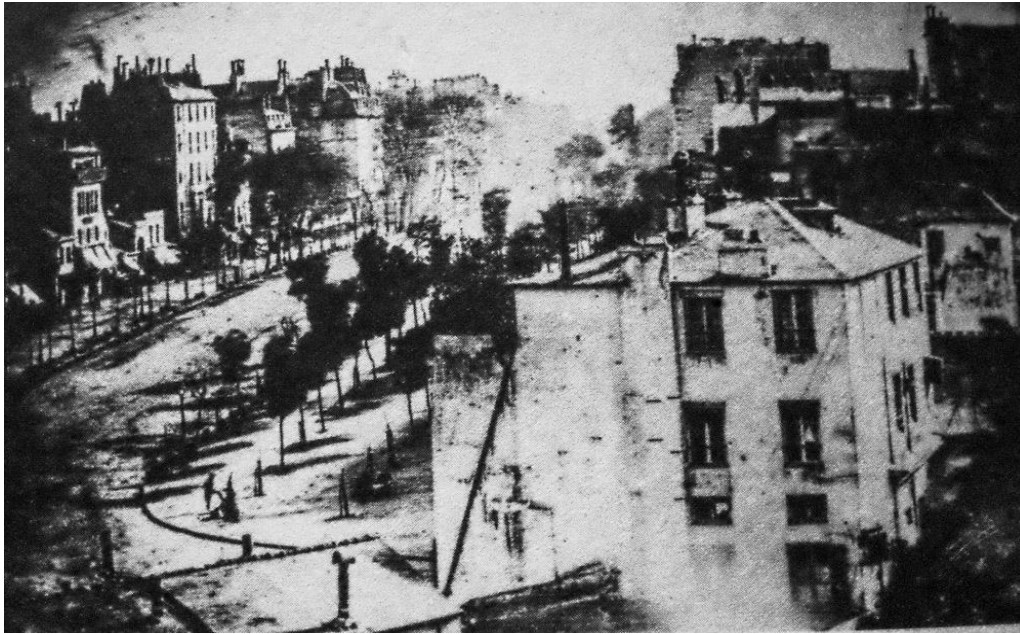


Fig. 3

The idea that a photograph should be a truthful record appears contestable. Barthes (2000, p.5) suggests that a photographic image bears an ingrained truth and contends that a pipe is always a pipe and that it most certainly existed. It is the implied authentic quality that seems important for Barthes; that it really was there and was therefore true. This view is considered by Tagg, J. (1998), and he shows perhaps how the widely perceived truthfulness of the photographic image is a misconception.

Tagg argues that the widely believed twentieth century idea of a photograph being so true as to be accepted as a document of reliable legal authenticity has its roots in the use of photography by State institutions during the second half of the nineteenth century along with the intentions of social control. It suited the governments of the time to promote photography as real and incontestable. Perhaps Solnit holds on to this vision of realism and truthfulness. Should the photograph be truthful?

In seeking to contextualise and explore Solnit's claims I propose first to consider the history of the landscape photograph and how the genre of the North American photographic landscape has developed.

I will look at the work of more contemporary artists such as the 'New Topographics' and how their image making might differ from the approaches of Adams. I will then return again to Solnit's apparent critique.

Berger, J. (1972), describes how the first landscapes were painted in the seventeenth century by Dutch artists who discovered that there was a limited market for the works on the basis that they "...answered no direct social need".

Berger points out that the historical development of oil paintings was connected with depictions of the human elements of possessions, power and wealth. Much of the art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries presented items that could be owned and controlled.

However, he holds that the genre of landscape at the outset partly evaded this patriarchal, capitalist structure. He explains that the sky cannot be possessed. He posits that for this reason realist depictions of landscape were originally commercially unsuccessful. It is only when the masters such as Rembrandt with his wonderful depiction of light, Turner and the later Impressionists move away from straight realism does the art market begin to value this genre.

With the art category of the landscape established by oil painters, Grunberg (1990, p.32) describes how the nineteenth century photographers such as Carleton Watkins document the wild, untamed and as yet unsullied North American wilderness. Solnit (2008, p.29) refers

to Foucault's premise that knowledge is power and that Carleton Watkin's pictures of Yosemite were created for documenting the terrain for militaristic purposes.

Green, T. (2018, p.152-184) supports Solnit's analysis. He describes the enormous efforts and cost of Watkin's 1860's expeditions into the valley and how it was the intentions of the San Francisco elites (with whom Watkins was associated) to encourage immigrants and settlers into the west.

He used advanced equipment capable of producing large prints and despite his intentionality his work was influential in the establishment of the Yosemite Valley as a national park. Green also explains (p.84) that it was Watkins intentions to display his pictures in a gallery as art.



Fig. 4

Grundberg (p.32), in corroboration suggests that these landscape pioneers were documentarians, the original topographics perhaps, whereas Adams is more concerned with the scenic and his creativity is directed towards a spectator's pleasure.

Grundberg outlines Adam's connections with Alfred Steiglitz. He argues that as an influential photographer, Steiglitz was associated with the Modernist movement. In a timeline, Steiglitz represents a notable bridge between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the development of photography within the United States. In the face of rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and developments in technology, he moved away from painterly pictorialism towards a more purist and realist approach.

Grundberg (p.34) points out that Adams was not the originator of the straight photography genre with its purist, crisp and sharply focused and carefully composed style. Rather, Edward Steichen and Paul Strand were forerunners before Adams and the f/64 group.

Wells, L. (2007, p.274-275) discusses the shift from the Modernist to the Conceptual. She highlights the focus of detailed looking considered important by the f/64 group but then describes how social, cultural and political elements are added to the aesthetic.

As an advocate of conservation, Ansel Adams was the director of the Sierra Club from 1936 to 1970 (Grundberg, p.31). Solnit (p.252) points out that Adams himself said that he felt that he had achieved as much as he could and that in the face of corporate and right-wing push back, those who could be reached had already been converted. It was time for a new message, and that photographs of a subject are time relevant and dependant and were inspired by his dedicated conservation campaigning. He felt that he needed to make way for new blood so that a fresh generation could "teach us to love even vacant lots out of the same sense of wholeness that has inspired the wilderness of photographers of the past

twenty-five years". (Adams, quoted in Solnit, 2008, p.251). Far from criticising Adam's work Solnit (p. 252) in fact heaps praise upon him and tells us that he had an immense political impact. She states, "No artist can ask for more than to live in a time when art can change the world".

In 1975 a show opened in New York titled the New Topographics featuring artists such as Robert Adams, Frank Gohlke, Lewis Baltz, Stephen Shore, Joe Deal, Nicholas Nixon and the German couple Bernd and Hilla Becher. Cheng (2011) describes the shift from the picturesque, straight and clean style of Ansel Adams to one where the human altered landscape features more prominently. She describes how their approach generally did not seek to criticize what went before but, for the same motivations as the f/64 group, rather to add a new way of creating. They wanted to fill in the gaps missed by previous landscapists, to include the urbanised, the exploited and the tainted.

In common with many photographers, I began making pictures because I wanted to record what supports hope: the untranslatable mystery and beauty of the world. Along the way, however, the camera also caught evidence against hope, and I eventually concluded that this too belonged in pictures if they were to be truthful and thus useful.

Adams, R. (1977). Prologue excerpt.



Fig. 5

This must surely be a blank spot in the landscape. It depicts a land stripped bare of almost all living things. There are newly constructed homes in a development that seem to stretch for miles to the horizon. It is difficult to imagine what might have been there before the bulldozers.

All that appears to be left of nature are a line of trees between the telephone poles, adjacent to the road. Electric pylons disappear into the haze and there are some enormous buildings in the distance signifying an industrial activity. The tracks of heavy machinery denote recent, ongoing work. Some structures are still in the process of construction and my gaze is drawn to the car which is placed prominently and this signifies to me its centrality to this life.

I imagine connotations of suburban sprawl, of long car journeys to the nearest shops or town and of an aspirational start on a budget for families not yet affluent enough to get greenery.



Fig 6

The two images above appear side by side in, *What Can We Believe Where?* The style is very different to that of Ansel Adams.

It shows the silhouette of a woman in a house on perhaps one of these new, monster developments. She lives in number 812. I wonder how many houses are in the entire street.

This conveys to me a sense of loss and bewilderment as I imagine her staring out onto a sprawling suburban development and a panoramic destruction of nature. I imagine a sparse room and mundane isolation.

It seems as if there is a tension in her stance and she looks defeated, lost in thought and caged in this brick box. For me, these are two wonderful photographs that work really well together.



Fig. 7

This might be a straight landscape but on closer inspection I notice a man-made pipe sticking out of the escarpment face. There are non-native palm trees in the middle distance with some buildings and the haze around the mountains might be smog. This conveys to me layers of interest and creates a discourse. Linnecar, C. (2012) discusses the elements of semiotics, code and convention and how meaning can be derived from a photograph. Barker, C. (2004) explains that the idea of a cultural discourse is related to the concepts of the philosopher and historian Michel Foucault and how meaning is created by signs, cultural practice and a lived experience. These images speak to me in a particular and complex way.



Fig. 8

Apparently, Robert Adams still seems to indulge in a partially out of focus and into the sun, pictorial and perhaps sublime genre with this coastal view but it is presented alongside his other work in apparent juxtaposition to it.

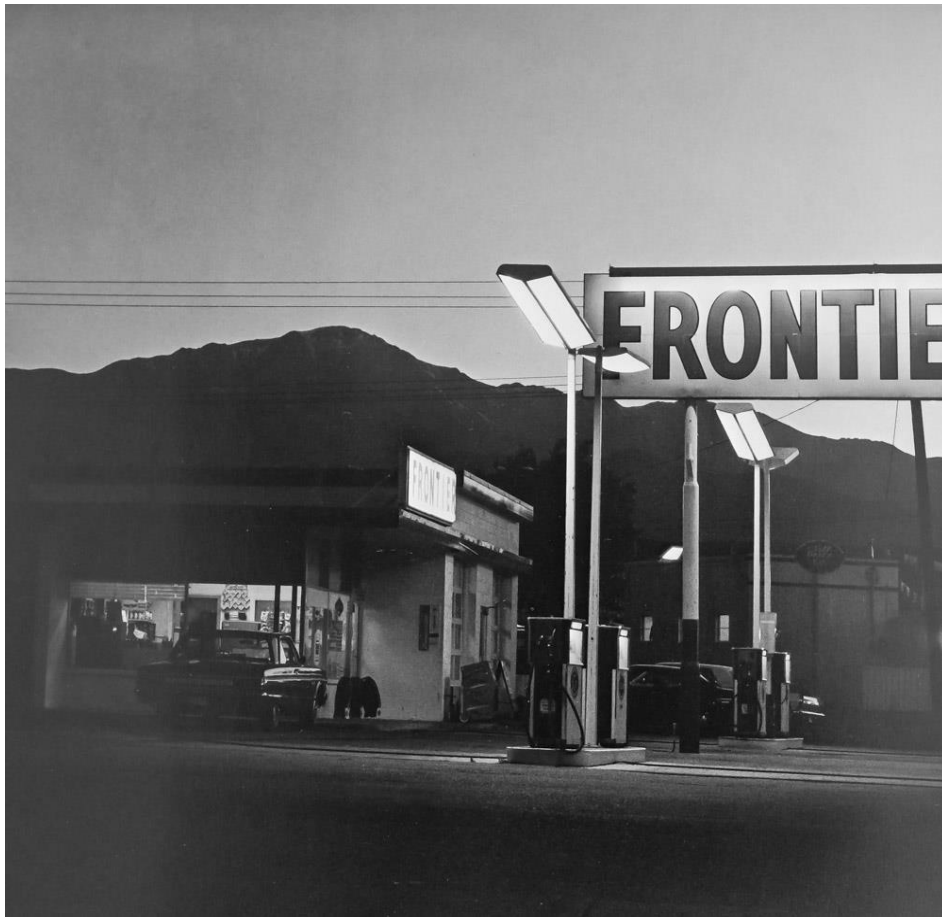


Fig 9

I particularly enjoy Adam's night-time pictures and here how he presents the invasive presence of the motor and all that goes with it.

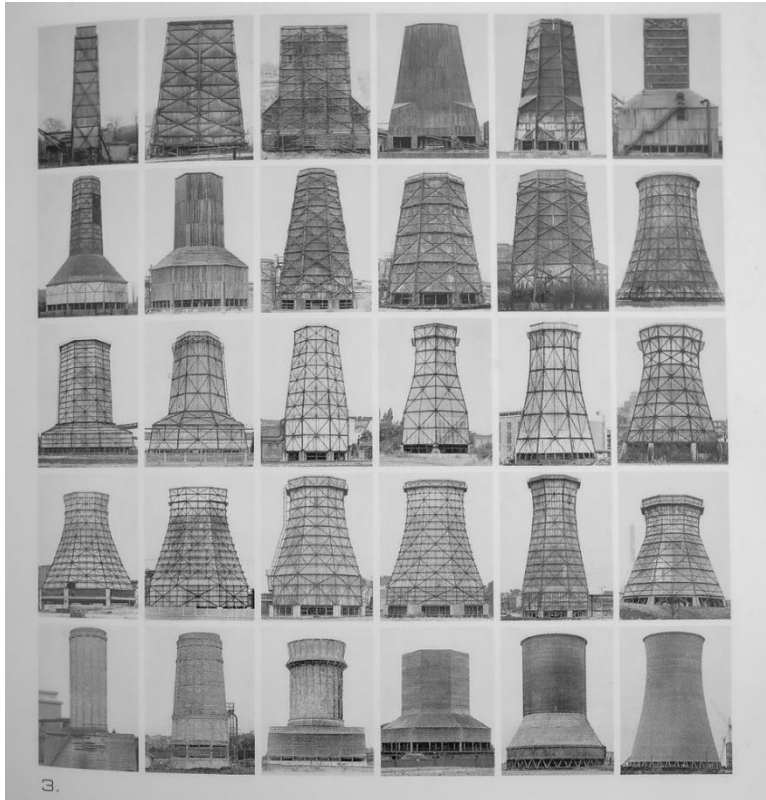


Fig 10

Bernd and Hilla Becher were part of the 1975 'New Topographics' New York show. Galassi, P. (2001, p.10) describes how the Bechers were celebrated by conceptual and minimalist artists from other cultural fields but within their own country were largely ignored by the photographic art community. Galassi (p.11) says that they were inspired by the work of August Sander and his 'Face of Our Time' series. They set about seeking to represent typical German industrial landscapes in a clinical and unartistic manner, arranging the work in what they called 'typologies', presented in formal, geometric grids.

Moving forward in time to a student of Bernd Becher is Andreas Gursky. He studied under Becher and also, earlier under Michael Schmidt. Galassi (p.13) describes how Schmidt was greatly influenced by Robert Adams.



Fig. 11

Galassi (p.13) describes how Gurski moved away from his two 35mm Leicas and his Cartier-Bresson style street work to adopt a slower, more contemplative approach with a large format camera.

Galassi (p.24) points out that Gurski over time seems to depart from the influence of the Americans and to create his own and distinct path. Like Shore, he usually works in colour but as Galassi highlights (p.31), “broadened the scope of photographic art”.



Fig.12



Fig. 13

Gursky's interior landscapes above seem to me to explore possibilities in an exciting way.



Fig. 14

Gursky's 'Rhine 2' sold for \$4.3 million at Christies auction house in New York. Kennedy, M (2011) tells us that it was the most paid for a photograph at the time. He goes on to explain that Gursky digitally excluded signs of human existence from the image.

In one sense it seems that I have gone in a circle, from where a photograph is criticised for excluding the traces of humanity to highlighting a picture, the most expensive photograph ever sold, that has deliberately excluded traces of humanity, but has been critically acclaimed.

Galassi, P. (p.10) suggests that photographic art development is not linear but nuanced and where there are no universally agreed upon definitions. It seems that it is sometimes difficult to separate out all the different approaches, influences and ism's. That art is not

clearly delineated and definable but layered and evasive is surely vital. Robert Adams uses the word 'untranslatable'.

He also talks about truthfulness but for me, I'm not sure that truthfulness as to what is shown is important. I think I am more occupied with how a picture makes me feel. Perhaps by 'truthful' he refers to authenticity and honesty of intention.

On reflection, Solnit seems to make a valid criticism about Ansel's work in an around the magnificent landscape scenes. They are truly magnificent but perhaps, from a modern perspective, one dimensional as art photographs.

I'm intrigued by the fact that in Camera Lucida, out of 24 pictures that interest Barthes, only one is a landscape and it is an urban scene with an obvious human presence.

Berger alludes to the issue that a landscape without the human presence is perhaps lacking something.

Instagram and much of the landscape genre is full of pretty post card pictures of mountains, lakes, beaches etc. and these hold little interest for me. They are mostly overly manipulated and one dimensional.

The New Topographics seem to have introduced additional layers of interest into the genre.

I still admire the work of Ansel Adams for his conservation efforts, his visualisation, his expertise in the medium of film and representation and his skills in the darkroom. Also, his work was not just about scenic wonders but far more diverse than implied by the question.

I also acknowledge his place in photographic culture and history and for me that makes his work additionally interesting. He carries with him an aura.

The issue of the genre of landscape and one dimensionality has troubled me for some time in my own work and the approaches of the New Topographics add an exciting element in signposting the possibilities for my personal practice.

When I saw some of the work of the Bechers in Cardiff Museum a few years ago I must admit that I found it difficult. I now discover, with the benefit of some contextualisation and art education that difficult work can often be deeply subtle and captivating.

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