

BEAUTIFUL LIES: Photography and Wilderness

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Abstract

Since its inception photography has been used to represent nature. With the rise of wet plate photography in the 1860s, multiple albumen prints could be produced relatively inexpensively, catering to a growing middle class with an increasing appetite for entertainments like photography and tourism. In America the subjugation of the indigenous population and the construction of railroads in the 1860s opened up the western frontier, and for the first time vast expanses of western wilderness were accessible to the tourist traveller. Stereographs and large display prints were produced to cater to this new market, resulting in a previously unseen flowering of landscape photography. The tourism-driven boom in American landscape photography in the nineteenth century was paralleled globally (albeit on a smaller scale), and Tasmanian landscape photographers like Beattie and Spurling were extremely active in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century.

Environmental debate of the last thirty years has produced its own visual culture based primarily on photographic representation of threatened wilderness areas, which is culturally disseminated through popular forms such as postcards, calendars, and books. In these popular forms, wilderness is aestheticised and depicted within rigid codes of representation as orderly, benevolent, and beautiful. Wilderness is traditionally defined as land devoid of human impact, but paradoxically in such representations it is symbolically available to the viewer for consumption in recreational, spiritual or aesthetic terms.

However, the specific visual culture of recent environmental debate has received little critical attention. This imagery raises several philosophical problems. First, our experience of nature is far more complex and dualistic than these representations suggest in their avoidance of disorder, death and decay, and attendant cycles of change and regeneration. Second, the denial of a human interface separates humankind symbolically from the rest of nature and perpetuates in the cultural imagination an antagonistic nature-culture relationship.

Photographs of the wilderness currently have a strong presence in Tasmania, where the imagery is used to market the 'natural' landscape for the local tourism industry. Popular belief holds that wilderness photography, if not actually invented in Tasmania, has at least a unique local character, and some of its proponents have achieved heroic stature. This paper attempts to place Tasmanian wilderness photography in a broader historical and geographical context, and suggest some of the aesthetic and philosophical issues it raises.

The rise of landscape photography as a genre in the nineteenth century relied heavily on aesthetic traditions already established in landscape painting, itself a relative newcomer to the artistic canon. From the eighteenth century, aesthetic theorists, most importantly William Gilpin, Edmund Burke and Emmanuel Kant, attempted to differentiate between the varied experiences of the beautiful, the picturesque and the sublime. Eighteenth-century landscape painting by artists such as Claude Lorrain typifies the aesthetics of the picturesque, in

particular its rationally articulated representation of graduated spatial recession. In the idealised Claudian pastoral landscape, nature is gentle and tempered by the presence of humanity, with nature and humans represented in mutually beneficial harmony.

By the 1820s, significant aesthetic shifts from this Claudian ideal were evidenced by the appearance of a new theme for American landscape art—wild, apparently uninhabited nature. The nationalistic linking of nature to religion (the belief that the sublime American landscape was God incarnate) might elevate landscape art to the status of religious and history painting. For Barbara Novak ‘the trinity of God, Man, and Nature was central to the nineteenth-century universe. Nature itself was illuminated by another Trinity: art, science, and religion ... by ... 1836, the terms God and nature were often the same thing, and could be used interchangeably’ (1980, p. 47).

These links were forged through the aesthetics of the sublime, which became an increasingly important aspect of the embrace of wild nature by nineteenth-century American landscape art. For Burke, ‘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’. Burke identified power, greatness, and ‘terrible ... privations’ such as ‘Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude, and Silence’ with the sublime, which he saw in opposition to beauty, ‘those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it’ (Hipple 1957, pp. 89–92).

Nowhere is the attempt to represent the sublime more apparent than in certain American landscape paintings of the 1840s to 1860s, by artists such as Frederic Church. These large works impress by sheer scale alone, attempting to immerse the viewer in the space of the painting, and by analogy both its literal and symbolic subject. Waterfalls, icebergs, mountains and chasms—all seem to roar with the power of unrestrained wildness.

Particular locations achieved mythic power in the nineteenth century as key sites of American sublimity. Thomas Cole, in his 1835 *Essay on American Scenery*, waxed lyrical:

And Niagara! that wonder of the world! —where the sublime and beautiful are bound together in an indissoluble chain ... In its volume we conceive immensity; in its course, everlasting duration; in its impetuosity, uncontrollable power. These are the elements of its sublimity (McShine 1976, p. 96).

Photography from its inception was used to represent all visible nature. The nineteenth-century passion for naturalistic representation embraced the ‘mirror with a memory’, and photography in its various genres flourished. The ascent of photography was aided by a parallel rise in tourism. The Grand Tour became a virtual rite of passage for many well-to-do Europeans, and with the introduction of wet plate photography in the 1850s, multiple albumen prints could be produced relatively inexpensively, catering to a rising middle class with an increasing appetite for entertainments like tourism. Photographers like the English businessman Francis Frith, active in Egypt and the Holy Land, supplied a growing market for stereographs and display prints depicting popular destinations. In the new worlds of Australia and America, which (to European eyes) lacked the material evidence of antiquity as subject matter, landscape locations and natural features became key subjects. Painterly preoccupations and motifs relating to the sublime experience in nature were reincarnated in the recurrent subjects of mountains, waterfalls and seascapes.

In America the suppression of the indigenous population and the construction of railroads in the 1860s opened up the western frontier to modern travel, and for the first time vast expanses of western wilderness were accessible to the tourist. Together with the numerous government survey expeditions of the period, this new market led to a previously unseen flowering of landscape photography. Small edition albums like A. J. Russell's *The Great West Illustrated* represented the construction of the transcontinental railway itself as well as the natural sites along its path—a juxtaposition of the technological and natural sublime.

Private entrepreneurs like William Henry Jackson in Denver and Carleton Watkins in San Francisco were able to work both for government survey expeditions and as specialised landscape photographers, selling stereographs and large prints. The active identification of natural monuments with Christian religious significance is visible in such pictures as Jackson's *Mount of the Holy Cross*, where the photographer retouched the negative to make the snowy cross more prominent. Jackson's photographs of the geothermal wonders of the Yellowstone region, taken while working for the Hayden survey in the 1870s, were used to convince the U.S. Congress to set aside the area as a reserve. They are one of the earliest examples of the employment of photography for a conservationist agenda.

With the expansion of the American frontier ever westward, iconic locations of American sublimity like Niagara were usurped by even grander western sights. One such place was Yosemite Valley, a remarkable Sierra Nevada canyon carved by glaciers and rivers to create granite monoliths thousands of feet high. By the 1860s tourists were flocking to this scenic wonder near the California goldfields, drawn by reports of the awesome sublimity of its granite walls. Amongst the tourists were at least three photographers competing to sell views of this natural icon. All used the wet collodion negative process of the period, which required substantial skill and experience to evenly apply the wet emulsion to the glass plate in the field, immediately prior to making the exposure. To describe the grand space of Yosemite (and to outdo his competitors), as early as 1861 Carleton Watkins used a wide angle lens of about seventy degrees with a very large 'mammoth plate' camera that could expose glass negatives as large as 46 x 56 cm (Palmquist 1983, p. 12). Flawlessly coating these glass plates with emulsion, Watkins produced technically brilliant large-scale albumen prints of Yosemite that achieved international commercial and critical success.

Although, in general, Watkins's photographs are classical in composition, carefully balanced and visually still, sometimes he could respond dramatically to the natural spectacle before his lens. Consider Watkins's 1865 photograph *Yosemite from Mariposa Trail (Yosemite Valley No. 1)*. The view is taken from the edge of a precipice, looking across the Valley to the huge granite monolith El Capitan, which is seen in half light and shadow in the centre background. The foreground barely exists from the high vantage point, except in the truncated form of a large tree silhouetted against the distant background of the far side of the Valley, which defines the left side of the picture. This is balanced on the right by the dramatic cliff of the Valley rim, the profile of which descends into the centre of the picture, leading the eye down into the depths of the Valley and then immediately up the shadow line of distant El Capitan behind. There is little hint of the rationally articulated recession of space, characteristic of the Claudian picturesque; instead we find alternating dark and light forms in abrupt juxtapositions of foreground, middleground and background elements—a catastrophic rupture of rational space, rather than a gentle journey through it.

U.S. government survey expeditions of the 1860s and 1870s employed photographers such as Jackson, Watkins and Timothy O'Sullivan to produce images of the newly-charted terrain.

Like Watkins and others, O'Sullivan was drawn to scenes of water, such as lakes and waterfalls. In his striking photograph of Pyramid Lake, Nevada from the 1867–69 King geological survey, the rock masses of tufa domes rise in a progression out of the depths of the lake. The eerie quality of the photograph relates in large part to the luminous tones of the water, rendered misty by the length of the wet-plate photographic exposure.

O'Sullivan placed human figures frequently in the images he made as part of the King survey, and the Wheeler survey of 1871–74, reminding us repeatedly of the vast expanse of the landscape by comparison with the small scale of the human within it. This placement of a figure in the landscape was an important device in much nineteenth-century photography, and sometimes it seems to heighten a sensation of contemplative stillness. This is particularly true in the series of photographs that O'Sullivan made in 1871 in the Black Canyon of the Colorado River. In a number of these images a figure in the foreground is seen in silhouette against the lighter tones of the water behind. Small but not minute in the frame, seated on the bank or in a moored boat with his back turned to us, the man seems to contemplate the awesome scene before him. Seen against the light sky, the half-shadowed canyon walls rise darkly up above him. The long photographic exposure has rendered the flowing water as a smooth and almost still surface, with only slight streaks like burnished silver to gently remind us of its relentless flow. With the turned back of his figure, O'Sullivan evokes the experience of stillness in nature. We can enter the picture by becoming the figure, and experience that stillness ourselves.

The tourism-aided boom in landscape photography was an international phenomenon, and these sublime themes of scale, space and stillness are played out in photography of landscapes from South America to Australasia. The boom was further enhanced by the invention of dry-plates in the 1870s, which freed the photographer from the laborious and technically demanding task of hand-coating the plates in the field immediately prior to exposure. Tasmanian landscape photographers like J. W. Beattie and Steven Spurling III were extremely active in the decades surrounding the turn of the century, producing countless images of well-known and less-visited sites across the island. Like their counterparts in America and elsewhere, Beattie and Spurling frequently focused their cameras on subjects of iconic significance—mountains, lakes, rivers, and particularly waterfalls.

The legacy of the nineteenth-century sublime is also evident in much of the landscape photography of the twentieth century, and nowhere more than in Ansel Adams' operatic vision of the American West. Often working in Yosemite Valley, like Watkins before him, Adams used his virtuoso tonal control through the Zone System to create highly dramatic renditions of the play of mass, light and space. Unlike the low contrast, subtle tonal gradations resulting from the combination of wet collodion negative and albumen print used by the nineteenth-century photographers, Adams's higher contrast silver prints display an almost Wagnerian sense of drama, having as much in common with the theatrics of painters such as Church as the quieter landscape photographs of the nineteenth century. In their drama, coupled with their absence of humanity, Adams' wilderness images are a creationist vision of nature in a state of becoming, suggesting the first days of Genesis, prior to defilement by man.

Transmitted through Adams with all the spiritual trappings, the lineage of the sublime (along with the picturesque and the beautiful) is also traceable in more recent colour wilderness photography, from Eliot Porter to Tasmania's Peter Dombrovskis. Much of this photography can be closely linked to the conservation movement. Environmental debate of the last century has encouraged a visual culture based primarily on photographic representations of

wilderness, which is disseminated through popular forms such as postcards, calendars and books. The growing American environmental consciousness in the 1960s saw a host of publications by the Sierra Club on the theme of threatened wilderness. One of the earliest and most successful was the 1962 book *In Wilderness is the Preservation of the World*, which paired quotes from Henry David Thoreau's 1854 *Walden* (which in the 1960s seemed to mesh perfectly with the growing awareness of the fragility of the environment) and Eliot Porter's exquisite large-format colour photographs. Porter was arguably the first and foremost landscape photographer to embrace colour as his chosen medium in the 1950s, and the strong sense of abstraction in his intimate, technically-perfect view camera work displays a sophisticated pictorial awareness. The Sierra Club went on to publish numerous other books featuring the work of Porter and many others, establishing the genre of coffee table books promoting wilderness values. An unfortunate irony of this publicity of wilderness for conservationist aims is the increased visitor impact that inevitably results from such mass-market exposure, with nature at risk of being loved to death.

In Tasmania, Olegas Truchanas, Peter Dombrovskis and their heirs have continued this association of views of untouched wilderness with conservation aims. Unlike much recent wilderness imagery, Truchanas frequently used the nineteenth-century device of incorporating a figure into the scene to create a sense of dramatic scale. Truchanas' imagery was used extensively in the campaign against the flooding of Lake Pedder by the Serpentine hydroelectric impoundment, as Dombrovskis' images were in the campaign to stop the Gordon-below-Franklin dam. Unlike Truchanas, Dombrovskis almost never included evidence of humans in his photographs. His landscape photographs, like those of Watkins, Adams and Porter before him, represent nature in a 'pure' (unpeopled) state.

Wilderness photography raises several philosophical problems. First, our experience of nature is far more complex and dualistic than these representations suggest in their avoidance of disorder, death and decay, and attendant cycles of change and regeneration. In this popular imagery wilderness is aestheticised in particular ways, through naturalistic pictorial codes largely inherited from the nineteenth century. The goal of the imagery is clearly to represent the subject as transparently (and most importantly as invitingly) as possible, facilitated by adhering rigidly to popular representational conventions. The naturalistic conventions used in recent wilderness photography include virtually exclusive use of colour, sharp rendition of detail, deep focus from foreground to distance, and generally warm chromatic values of pleasant sunny conditions. (The converse—monochrome, soft or limited focus, evidence of camera or subject movement, and inclement weather—that might result in pictures more convergent with the typical visitor experience of wilderness, are very rarely utilised as pictorial strategies.) These pictures seductively draw the eye into and rationally through the representational space, where every detail of nature's beauty is available for consumption through the viewer's gaze. Wilderness is traditionally defined as land devoid of human impact, but paradoxically in wilderness photography, it is symbolically available to the viewer for consumption in recreational, spiritual and aesthetic terms.

Postmodernism reiterates that all representations, however naturalistic, are fictions. Nevertheless, a naïve belief in the veracity of the photographic image persists to this day. Even black and white photographs, which on rational analysis present a high degree of abstraction (from our own retinal perceptions of colour and depth), have a convincing authenticity about them. The photographic illusion constructs an apparently transparent window on reality, a world which itself is highly modified by human agency. In wilderness imagery the photographic construct is used to represent another construct—wilderness

itself—which is created by the drawing of an artificial boundary between humankind and the rest of nature.

Almost all modern wilderness photographs rely on an obvious lie—there is never any evidence of humanity in the picture. So while rationally we must deduce that if a photograph was made, a photographer must have been present (along with all the paraphernalia of their profession), the pictures always pretend the reverse. Does this denial of a human interface serve to separate humankind symbolically from the rest of nature, and subtly perpetuate in the cultural imagination an antagonistic nature-culture relationship? Can we truly identify with nature and care for it, until we see (and represent) ourselves as a part of it? While wilderness photography embraces the nineteenth century view of Nature as God (in Gaia Theory through the archetype of the Mother), wilderness (God) appears as a kind of Virgin Mary/whore synthesis. In these photographs, the body of nature is represented as untouchable and inviolate, but available to the observer for visual consumption in almost pornographic terms, remaining always the other.

When we make photographic images of wilderness, I hope we can keep these issues in mind. As a photographer and teacher of photography, I can offer a number of possible ways to address these problems. First, we can look to the precedent of nineteenth-century landscape photography, when the distinctions between a peopled and an unpeopled landscape were defined far less didactically. In this regard the inclusion of human presence, either literally or symbolically, can perhaps begin to erode some of the largely artificial boundaries we have erected between nature and culture. Secondly, we can draw from postmodern thought regarding the inherently constructed nature of all systems of representation, including photographic naturalism. In this regard the process of photography can be consistently acknowledged, rather than persistently concealed. Not all wilderness photographs have to be transparent windows on an unpeopled nature. The distinctions between nature and culture can be blurred, along with the photographs themselves. Rain and wind have their own kind of poetry, and framing, focus, and the rendering of movement are expressive controls to be experimented with, not rigid conventions to be followed with religious fervour.

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