

American Landscape Photography. A problematic tradition

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Résumé

La photographie américaine de paysage est souvent vue comme une métaphore sociale. Cela a été longtemps vrai, mais au fur et à mesure que les photographes sont devenus plus conscients de l'histoire de leur médium et que le doute sur l'effet social et la transparence des images s'est installé, le paysage en photographie a tourné à la métonymie, renforçant encore l'aporie communicative qui s'est emparée, depuis une vingtaine d'années, de la photographie mais aussi de certains arts.

Abstract

American landscape photographs are often said to be social metaphors. It was the case for a long time but in the past two decades, as photographers have become more aware of the history of the medium and as the social power (and the transparency) of images has been increasingly questioned, landscape photographs have turned into metonymies in a self-referential system. The present paper charts this transition in a historical perspective.

Mots-clés : États-Unis, photographie, paysage, New Topographics, Ouest américain

Keywords : United States, photography, landscape, New Topographics, American West

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In the following remarks on contemporary landscape photography in the United States, I would like to suggest that contrary to the commonly accepted idea that landscape photography works as a social metaphor it is possible to look at it as a metonymy—or rather as a metonymical practice. I will argue that landscape photography has now entered a (post-modern?) phase in which it is first and foremost in a transitive relation to itself and (much) less a transitive relation with the

society in which it is produced. I intend to point at a contemporary symptom showing how much of photography today has forgotten its rootedness in the visible world to focus—often with very mixed results—on its own history.

1) A genealogy of landscape photography in the United States

I need to start with contextualizing the tradition of landscape photography as the point I am making is precisely the overreliance of photography on its newly discovered history.

If the 19th century was the century of the American landscape—both in paintings and in photographs—and that of its metaphoric function in the construction of the nation, things began to change around the first decades of the 20th century. The advent of modernism in art was certainly a decisive factor in the relative decline of the traditional conception of the landscape, and even in the practice of landscape altogether. Something, however, was even more decisive. It was the shift of American culture to the cities which drove the countryside, the open-landscape into another sphere—the sphere of memory and nostalgia, the pain of things gone forever—and thus took on a new and yet problematic importance.

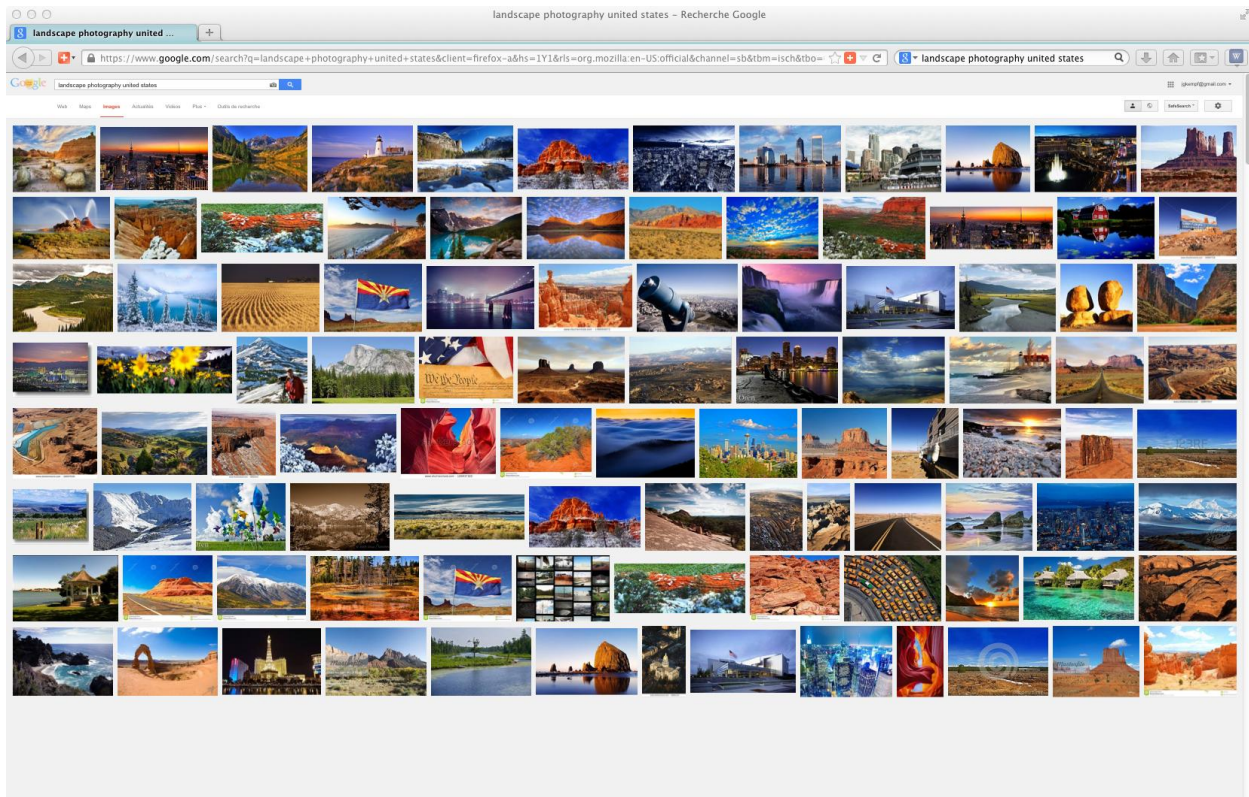
This was when the Ansel Adams-Walker Evans debate came in. Ansel Adams, who by the late 1930s had established himself as a leading landscape photographer and master printer, criticized Evans' *American Photographs*—a book and an exhibition at MoMA in 1938—in the most interesting manner. On the surface it was a conservative attack on a liberal: “I am so goddam mad over what people from the *left tier* think America is.” [my emphasis] (Mellow, 1999, 382). But it was in fact much more. What really upset Adams was first that Evans' individual pictures did not always stand on their own: “... so few of the pictures are good photographs [note the choice of words here] in any qualification that I do not believe the book should be called *American Photographs* and put out by an art organization.” According to Adams, they did not deserve to be called “photographs”—to him they were just “pictures”—or even “American” as they misrepresented the true and essential nature of the country, something Adams explains in the same letter: “Stinks, social and otherwise, are a poor excuse and imitation of the real beauty and power of the land and the real people inhabiting it. Evans has some beautiful things but they are lost in the struggle for social significance” (Mellow, 1999, 381). Adams—as a true conservative—not only disliked “committed art” (which Evans' actually hardly was) but also opposed beauty to social significance.

Granted, not all the pictures in Evans' collection called “American Photographs” were landscapes. Actually few of them were, but they clearly attempted at building an American landscape, and what Adams the landscape photographer criticizes in Evans is that the *true* beauty of the land and the people—which constitutes America-the-nation (and one would even like to say, “America-the-beautiful”)—was lost on him. In other words, according to Adams, Evans is powerless to extract the metaphoric dimension by showing “the truth.”

This debate is fundamental. When Adams accuses Evans of misusing the medium (whose function according to Adams is to emphasize the true beauty of things as they are, a very old streak in American representation), he clearly defends, first of all, a transitive idea of the

photograph: a beautiful photograph is the picture of a beautiful thing and vice versa; and then he reacts in a sentimental, expressionistic way to photography, something Evans loathed in the name of “pure realism.” They both defended an idea of “pure photography,” but those were completely opposed ones.

In that respect, Adams was on the side of Edward Weston¹ and Georgia O’Keeffe². As O’Keeffe shifted from the skyscrapers of New York to flowers and the shapes of the New Mexico hills, and Weston focused on his peppers and tree stumps, what happened was that as metaphoric as their images were, they completely followed Adams’ prescription of seeking “the beautiful thing³”. Traditional metaphoric landscape photographs did not disappear, however. But from the 1930s to the 1970s they were not made by “creative photographers” anymore, leaving pretty much Ansel Adams—and a few of his followers—as sole operators in the field. Landscapes also remained strong in popular photography, being regularly published in coffee-table books and in *National Geographic*. The development of color and color reproduction offered always more spectacular views of “the country of the free and the brave,” something also exemplified in Technicolor westerns.



Picture 1: Search results for “landscape photography United States” in Google image. They illustrate the predominance of lyrical and spectacular images of the calendar / coffee table kind.

¹ <http://www.edward-weston.com/edward_weston.htm>

² <<http://www.georgiaokeeffe.net>>

³ It might be interesting to note that Adams complained about Evans to none other than Weston and O’Keeffe, an indication of their shared critical system. Apparently in 1935, Adams had already written to Weston: “Your shells will be remembered long after Evans’ picture of two destitutes in a doorway” (Mellow, 1999, 381).

In this type of practice, the landscape kept its strong spiritual ties to a vague religiosity mixed with nationalism often masquerading as (popular) science. In *National Geographic*, it remained environmentalist and humanistic, something that coffee-table books and calendars displayed more rarely. This only makes Walker Evans' pictures more revolutionary in the context of the 1930s, as they did not follow either openly modernist or constructivist aesthetics either⁴. Evans questioned the transitivity of “documentary photography” and its power based on the metaphor, and substituted that of the metonymy—as if the photographer was merely taking a sample of the larger world.

Also, while Weston's photographs—exploring natural forces on a micro-scale—relied intensely on metaphors, Evans' radical inventory of the American scene radically redefined both the status of the (photographic) subject and the very notion of “landscape.” His move had little impact at first, at least on the photographic community, despite his being exhibited by MoMA as early as 1938—but then the museum did not have the status it has acquired since⁵. It was only in the late 1950s/early 1960s, with such photographers as Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander and Gary Winogrand, that the spirit—if not the letter—of Evans' images resurfaced to become central in American photography.

Although “street photography” (a very different practice from Henri Cartier-Bresson's form of photography *in the street*) provoked a formal reaction in the late 1970s with a return to the view camera and the posed photograph—adding color to boot—both practices have a lot in common, in that they generalized the notion of landscape making it ubiquitous in photographic projects, both on the part of the critics and of the photographers themselves.

Two major exhibitions marked this evolution: “Toward a Social Landscape” (Rochester, 1966) and “New Topographics. Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape” (Rochester, 1975). By putting these two exhibitions produced almost ten years apart by the same institution back-to-back, I am implying that by severing as it were the landscape from even the hint of “nature” they definitely established a new era for the landscape, a new status for it, and even a new form.

2) The Critical landscape. Forms and aporias

The “new landscape” which emerged with Walker Evans, was an epistemological break, which for the most part can be located in the very few but seminal photos he made in the 1930s when working for the FSA, mainly in the South.

From the vernacular to the decrepit

Landscape in the United States had been the contemplation of the future of the nation, materializing the nation of futurity. The substitution of the “historical” monuments of the Old World by the natural monuments of the New is also marked a shift in the very function of the

⁴ Strict (or high) modernism was associated to Evans' pictures only later. At the time it was represented by the Stieglitz school and photographers like Paul Strand.

⁵ His lesson, however, was not wasted on Russell Lee, a photographer on the FSA team, and a couple of others as well, who drew much of their documentary style from Evans. See KEMPF, 1988.

museum: not so much to preserve or conserve the past—in a traditional aristocratic fashion—as to offer the democratic promise of an open future. This is what the Frontier was all about. The massive urbanization and industrialization of the country did not change the approach; it simply shifted its locale.

What began as an interest in the vernacular, and characterized a sensitivity very much present in the 1930s when the concern of a nation in depression was the surveying—and in fact the identifying—of what constituted the true American scene, later turned into a systematic covering of its disappearance. In turn it redefined the landscape not as “nature” anymore but as anything that did not strictly focus on human beings making the definition impossibly broad and vague. Among the favorite marks of the “landscape”, the stark beauty of the tall buildings was one, also the decaying mansion, but perhaps most significantly there was the omnipresent sign⁶.

The Cool as the aesthetic of ugliness

By the 1960s signs had invaded the American scene—something Evans perceived very early in the 1930s—and the forest of signs had turned into the landscape of chaos⁷. What had begun as the realization of the mesmerizing power of the metropolis—a leading feature of modernist art—now looked like a space so semiologically saturated that it hardly made sense anymore.

This is when I date the first major step in the “depoliticizing” of photographs, and their abandoning the metaphoric function. As long as the metaphor was an underlying principle, photographers, even as they recorded their environment, produced a statement about it and at the same time about *what it should be*. The metaphor used something which was present to “speak” about something which was not. Destruction thus became a pervading theme but was used in such a systematic way that it became a self-referential motif.

When Lee Friedlander or Garry Winogrand photographed American streets, shop windows or passers-by, they abandoned any transitive illusion but also simultaneously—and this probably characterizes the post-modernist sensibility—any real “point of view” on the world. They became paradoxically self-referential: Friedlander not surprisingly did a lot of self-portraits and later moved onto photographing trees⁸. This is how I understand Garry Winogrand’s oft-quoted aphorism: “I photograph to see what things look like when photographed.” The landscape did not turn “social” in the commonly accepted meaning of the term. It merely turned urban, inhabited (as with the meaning of the word “socialize”), and came out as entirely devoted to the recycling of or simply the commentary on previous signs and often previous images. In this economy, the signs become free agents, floating items living a life of their own, only to become opportunistic inhabitants of this or that photographer’s work. This is what I mean by the shift to the metonymy: each realization in the guise of an image is merely a part of a greater whole made up of signs and images that inhabit the landscape and for whom photographers are mere surrogate mothers, as it were.

⁶ <<http://www.abbeville.com/interiors.asp?ISBN=0789201704&CaptionNumber=01>>

⁷ <http://www.moma.org/images/dynamic_content/exhibition_page/14737.jpg?1404310817>

⁸ <<http://fraenkelgallery.com/portfolios/1960s-self-portraits>> ; <<http://fraenkelgallery.com/portfolios/frederick-law-olmsted>>

To me—at least it is an hypothesis I am making here—this is an epitome of *cool* in photography, images displaying a “stylish stoicism”, keeping everything in control through “a signature style”.

The environment and environmental concerns

Something slightly different, however, happened in the late 1970s. With the rising general environmental sensibility of the times, photographers also began to revisit the landscape in its original definition. This revisitation, however, did not take the form of a metaphoric commentary upon society—or only marginally—but rather of a clear indication of the stigma of development upon the natural scene. But it was also a long exercise in intertextuality and by extension in metonymy.

The first step was that taken by Robert Adams (no relation to Ansel Adams) who literally reversed the perspective, turning his camera 180° back from the view on the open, nature, and the future towards the built-up space, the fringes, suburbia. I would call it the era of downturn or reversal¹⁰. Lewis Baltz in one of his first opuses, *Park City*, adopted a similar stance¹¹. What characterized these photographs—even compared to those by Evans—is that they focussed on a small part of the territory standing for the rest of it (a synecdoche of what Americans were doing to their space) and called in—in metaphoric fashion—the whole range of previous glorious if not triumphant embodiments of the nation as visualized in the traditional American imagery. They came out as commentaries upon the very metaphoric function of photographs, but merely to signify its total futility, uselessness.

The next step in this process was the *New Topographics*. Their program was contained in their collective name—actually given by the curator of an exhibition but generally accepted by the photographers—and clearly evinced the link with the tradition of landscape photographers and the surveying practices of the 19th century. Their premise was that the contemporary form of the landscape was now to be found not in the natural forms—even when altered—but in the semi-industrial architecture of American suburbs. “Pure” landscapes gave way to an exploration of interspaces, in-betweens and interfaces, and beyond, of processes¹².

3) Crisis in the narrative and triumph of the medium

Formalism redux

What I perceive as the connection between the various practices that bloomed after the 1970s is irony and a deep malaise. Despite already well-established misgivings as to the testimonial power of photographs, these photographers invested mimetic tools and forms—large-format cameras when their predecessors had been Leica people and for the first time introducing color and

⁹ Just as a reminder, the “definition” of *cool*—if it ever were possible—is: “Cool [connotes] a balanced state of mind, a dynamic mode of performance, and a certain stylish stoicism. A cool person has a situation under control, and with a signature style.” (National Portrait Gallery, *Exhibition “American Cool.”*)

¹⁰ <<http://media.artgallery.yale.edu/adams/landing.php>>

¹¹ <<http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artists/3148/artwork?artwork=10327>>

¹² <http://www.sfmoma.org/exhib_events/exhibitions/407>

producing large prints—while proclaiming the impossible relationship to and narrativity of the real. I would define them as highly skeptical and even suspicious photographers. In other words the only thing left to them seemed to be the making of beautiful images. The shift resulted from an intellectual, even spiritual, crisis, but was made even more potent—and easy—by the fact that photography in the meantime had become a major player in the art market.

The status of the photographic print as art object with rising values and serious collectors, combined with a general trend in the art of the 1970s/1980s towards minimalism had several consequences on photographic practice. One of them—not the least important—was an improvement in the economic situation of some photographers attracting many new players (the demographics exploded as the entry ticket in photography is relatively low). The other was the seemingly infinite multiplication of subjects—from the kitchen (Stephen Shore¹³) to the walk-down-the-street—eschewing what had been the acme of previous photographic practices, i.e. the complexity of the moment (as with Henri Cartier-Bresson or Robert Frank). In a way the landscape became the “easy way” out of the demanding practice of meaningful street photography, a practice that required direct engagement with other people. Not so with the landscape.

The “American scene” with its individual anarchism was particularly apt in stimulating a mixture of kitsch and surrealistic superimpositions or collocations that had long been the trademark of photography¹⁴. This particular aesthetic aims at a form of frontality—or “platitude” to use Eric de Chassey’s expression—which quickly became a trademark and a mannerism (which I find an easy way out), allowing the photographer not to take position in a very literal sense: not to search for his or her specific position in space¹⁵.

What happened then under the guise of transparency / objectivity / reportage—as a way of reclaiming the lost ethos—was a strange shift from a real *understanding* of things—implying a real *engagement* with them—to a manner of cold distance and pure aestheticisation in the form of a mere *statement of existence*. To put it differently, the verism of images hides a disengagement as they become disjunct from their contexts as “pure photographs”.

Metonymy and solipsism

In fact the practitioners of *New Topographics* were less topographers of the new post-industrial space than topographers of the new photographic scene, engaged in a game of citation which I define here as metonymic. To support this view, I would like to develop briefly some examples.

Consider Richard Misrach. He is probably one of the photographers most committed towards the environment, at least in the choice of his topics (the aftermaths of catastrophes, nuclear pollution in the West, petrochemical America among others) and writings. But if one looks at the comparisons made by critics, he is most often compared with Thomas Struth and Andreas

¹³ <http://www.houkgallery.com/exhibitions/2005-03-08_stephen-shore>

¹⁴ The pre-war Surrealistic Cartier-Bresson is very often frontal in his framing.

¹⁵ In France, the realization came differently and later, and focussed on the effects of modernization, but curiously long after it had affected society. In Germany which had undergone “Year Zero” [*Jahre Null*], the formalist landscape appeared with the Düsseldorf School as part of a *memory* work.

Gursky, the German photographers. Although Anne Tucker writes that Misrach is “driven by issues of aesthetics, politics, ecology and sociology,” (Tucker, 1996) and although Misrach himself said in 2011 that his “career, in a way, has been about navigating these two extremes — the political and the aesthetic” (Brown, 2011), one hardly finds it in the actual images, unless by a great leap of faith on the part of the viewer. His *Desert Cantos*—the title is **un**ambiguous—show a desire to resist banality through a lyricism which is reminiscent of Turner (J.M.W. Turner, not the Frederick Jackson Turner of the Frontier hypothesis)¹⁶.

Even many of the project titles—ironic as they are—fail to completely restore the relevance of a critical discourse on society: *Uncommon Places* (Stephen Shore) for the most banal places, *The Good Land* (John Lusia)¹⁷ for decaying Wisconsin, *No Place* (John Lusia)¹⁸ for closed businesses.

One of the best example of this shift towards the metonymic is the series *Road to the Oxbow*¹⁹, a direct reference to Cole’s iconic painting, which presents the most banal and commercialized spaces but fails to engage the viewer in anything but a nostalgic feeling not so much for the past as for *the image of the past*, which is why I call it *metonymic*. And if one looks at William Christenberry, one sees him mimicking and repeating Walker Evans’ images *ad lib*.

I also find the title held by Lewis Baltz, “Professor of conceptual photography”, quite revealing of the shift I was describing earlier. Lastly, the common practice of the photographic series deserves some comments, as it can be said to be the triumph of the metonymic protocol²⁰. For the protocol mimics scientific procedures—purportedly objective, and thus on the surface sparing the artist the necessity of taking a stand—while the accompanying discourse seemingly anchors images in politics; and yet this protocol appeared when photography met the art market, a rather intriguing and, I believe, not entirely fortuitous coincidence. The distance afforded by the series can be connected with the influence of the Bechers (and “their” Düsseldorf school) who were the only foreign photographers to be included in the New Topographics show²¹.

But the defiance—or at least diffidence—towards the effect of sentiment in pictures that can be understandable from people who experienced Nazi propaganda as young children (the Bechers were born in 1931 and 1934) and were citizens of a country one third of which lived under communist propaganda, is less understandable for photographers who inherited a liberal tradition in a most open society²².

¹⁶ <<http://fraenkelgallery.com/artists/richard-misrach>>

¹⁷ <<http://www.johnlusiaphoto.com/index.php#mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&s=0&p=1&a=0&at=0>>

¹⁸ <<http://www.johnlusiaphoto.com/index.php#mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&s=0&p=5&a=0&at=0>>

¹⁹ <http://petercroteauphotography.com/section/307489_The_Road_to_the_Oxbow.html>

²⁰ See Bruce Myren, 40th parallel <<http://www.brucemyren.com/projects/the-fortieth-parallel>> or Ben Kelly, *The Night* <<http://ben-kelly.com/the-night>>

²¹ <<http://www.c4gallery.com/artist/database/bernd-hilla-becher/bernd-hilla-becher.html>>

²² A word about digital photography. I do not believe the challenges brought upon by digital imaging will radically alter the perspective. Now one can reconstruct whole “real/imaginary” landscapes, seemingly detaching the image from any existing referent in the real world, or one can even seize and recycle the flow of online images. Some photographers use them as *objets trouvés*, others mine the access to the landscape afforded by *Google View*. [<<http://www.kylefordphotography.com/An-American-Road-Trip>>] I do not see them, however, as truly redefining the nature of the landscape, but merely mourning the replacement of true experience for armchair touring. They seem more a comment on the loss of relevance and agency—and one could argue there that it might be verging on the metaphoric—although the metonymic component is also very much present.

Elements of conclusion

The repetitiveness and lack of focus of most contemporary creative landscape photography mirrors the cottage industry of the posed portrait, and the success of landscapes in popular photography—where it has a more global, less national scope (*viz* the triumph of Sebastião Salgado and Yann Arthus-Bertrand’s *The Earth From Above*)—evidences the aporia of a coherent, unified narrative on contemporary societies. Why would photographers be more enlightened than other citizens? At least they could be expected to make visible certain things that escape our common radars, but actually they don’t. I would venture to say that this is yet another instance of the question of what photographs can do, and especially cannot do, and their loss of social currency despite their present ubiquity. More broadly, our age is one in which anything can be said of anything: it is as if the metaphor had lost much of its relevance and power. It might regain it if, as I expect, we experienced a new ice age of censorship and deprivation of freedom. In the meantime, visual metaphors are so overwrought that they are plain dead, and can only suggest a view of society as cybernetic—which is not to say much. Literalism triumphs—and not only in born-again christianity!—in the form of an idiotic reality—in the sense that “the real is idiotic”, as Clement Rosset most aptly put it, that is to say absolutely singular (Rosset, 1977).

The contemporary landscape photograph has set itself free from its referent, and thus from its metaphoric value. It has replaced it by an internal metonymic network (of images), a self-referential one in which images dialogue with other images. The metaphor demands a point of view, a point of view requires an opinion, a voice. The metonymy by contrast is the triumph of the pure statement. As is the wasted, exhausted scene of the American landscape.

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