

Photography and Acclimatization: Place Photography from an Immigrant's Perspective

Shreepad JOGLEKAR
Assistant professor
Kansas State University
sjoglek@ksu.edu

Résumé

Le paysage diffère-t-il selon qu'il est perçu par un immigré ou un natif ? Quel rôle le processus de création de l'image photographique est-il susceptible de jouer dans la naturalisation d'un immigré ? De quelle manière les environnements construits et naturels, dans le pays d'origine mais aussi la terre d'accueil, façonnent-ils l'identité de l'immigré ? Je tenterai dans cet article de répondre à ces questions diverses, qui sous-tendent l'œuvre de nombreux photographes étrangers, dont je fais partie. L'article portera essentiellement sur deux corpus d'œuvres en cours réalisés entre 2011 et 2014, intitulés *Kentucky Wildlife Management Area* et *Off Road Vehicle Parks*. L'expérience que fait l'immigré d'un nouvel environnement est toujours compliquée par des attentes et des a priori. L'analyse de cet éloignement de mon pays natal, lequel connaît de profonds bouleversements, m'autorise à postuler que la liberté d'invention inhérente à tout processus de représentation (verbale ou visuelle) offre à l'immigré l'opportunité de se familiariser différemment avec la réalité perçue, tout en permettant à ces attentes et ces idées préconçues qui portent sur le nouveau cadre de vie de remonter à la surface du conscient. C'est en cela que la photographie grand format est en mesure d'exercer une influence décisive.

Abstract

Does an immigrant perceive the landscape differently from the native? What role can the process of photographic image making play in the naturalization of an immigrant? How do the constructed and natural environments in the home and the host country shape an immigrant's identity? In this essay I will attempt to address these various questions, which inform the work of many immigrant photographers, including myself. The essay will primarily focus on two ongoing bodies of works produced between 2011 and 2014, titled *Kentucky Wildlife Management Area* and *Off Road Vehicle Parks*. For an immigrant the experience of the new surroundings is always complicated by expectations and prejudices. Analyzing the experience of being in a foreign land, and being absent from my homeland, while it undergoes profound changes, I would like to claim that the creative license inherent to any process of representation (through words or images) allows the immigrant to develop a new familiarity with the perceived reality, but it also allows the said prejudices and expectations from the surroundings to raise to the surface of consciousness. In that the process of large format photography can play a key role.

Mots-clés : paysage, photographie, immigré, États-Unis, Inde, Mumbai (Bombay), environnement, nucléaire, identité

Keywords : Landscape, Photography, Immigrant, United States, India, Mumbai, Environment, Nuclear, Identity

Plan

Kentucky Wildlife Management Area
Off Road Vehicle Parks

My primary exposure to American life came in the early 1990s through television and cinema. In the course of my education in Mumbai, India, which happened mostly in vernacular medium schools (where I was taught in the regional language, Marathi) I was exposed to very little of American or even European literature. Before 2003 (the year I emigrated to the United States), the only novel I had read in English was *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand. Howard Roark's militant creativity was fascinating to me, but I was much more enamored with the cozy coffee-shop ambiance of *Friends* and *Frasier*. I was equally attracted to the monumental landscape of violence from *Mackenna's Gold*, and the immaculate and spacious interiors from *Mrs Doubtfire* and *Home Alone*, as if these spaces had ever existed. It is relevant to mention here that while admiring these lavish home environments, I was not aware of a statistical detail: according to a 2006 NPR¹ story, the "average American house size has more than doubled since the 1950s" (Adler 2006). These cinematic exposures projected a virtual image of the great American way of life, similar to the shadows in Plato's allegorical cave. In 2003 I moved to the United States for graduate studies in Photography. As a photographer I began looking for the physical evidence of the iconic American environments that I had witnessed on screen 8,000 miles away. After the initial amazement about the freeways, air-conditioned concrete-and-glass malls, and the national parks, I soon realized that these popular environments are punctuated with a different, less celebrated, vernacular reality that is not seen on television, or in the movies; a reality that is mostly invisible from outside the culture and the geographic borders of the United States. It is this omnipresent vernacular environment that I could not relate to. This sense of alienation intrigued me. It also triggered my interest in the history of American vernacular landscape, architectural theory, and the psychological relation that we have with built spaces around us.

I fully agree with John Stilgoe's definition of landscape, as that which "happens not by chance but by contrivance, by premeditation, by design; a forest or swamp or prairie, no more constitutes a landscape than does a chain of mountains" (Stilgoe 1982, 3). As an artist, I feel most curious about my immediate surroundings, rather than the popular subject matters such as national monuments, superfund sites, and larger-than-life vistas. My immigrant status releases me from any historical, cultural, or psychological affiliation to my surroundings. To use Milan Kundera's words, this 'lightness of being' is often unbearable, but it also allows me to take a detached and critical view of the landscape. In this article I am presenting my observations of the American environment and the culture reflected in it, primarily focusing on two ongoing bodies of images titled *Kentucky Wildlife Management Area* and *Off Road Vehicle Parks*.

¹ National Public Radio, popularly known as NPR, is a network of radio stations in the United States.

Kentucky Wildlife Management Area

In 2011, I was an artist in residence in Paducah, Kentucky, a small town of about 25,000 people. During my stay, I came across a wildlife management area, about 13 miles west of Paducah. This state-managed natural refuge attracts fishing, hunting, and other outdoor enthusiasts. Following my interest in human 'management' of ecologies, I started making images in this green zone and soon understood it to be much more than a wildlife refuge. This six-and-a-half-thousand-acre land forms a green muffler, a buffer space, around the largest nuclear enrichment plant in the United States. To understand the complex significance of this land I had to look back in its history. Paducah appeared on the map in the early 1800s as the largest inland port in the United States. In the 1950s it became the 'atomic city,' as the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant was set up 16 miles to the west. This new installation produced some expected and also unexpected effects on the society and the environment of this area.

According to a 2004 report released by the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability:

Between 1952 and 1985, 7 million pounds of uranium was (sic) buried on site, 60,000 pounds was (sic) released to local streams, and 130,000 pounds were released to the atmosphere. Any uranium released to the atmosphere, subsequently, is deposited on the ground and migrates to surface and subsurface waters. The release of uranium into the environment has continued since 1985. (Radioactive Waste Management Associates 2004, 147)

Intrigued with this information, I have been exploring the public lands surrounding the uranium enrichment plant. The West Kentucky Wildlife Management Area is a vast green space that attracts us with its lush vegetation, calm ponds, and subtle creeks with clear waters. Initially we are enamored with the natural serenity of the landscape (slide 1). But just as we enter the formal boundary of the West Kentucky WMA we come across the first violently orange warning sign that says, 'What to Do if the Sirens Sound.' It lists four steps to take in case the sirens sound, which include leaving the area, and finding a concrete structure to hide in. This is one of the several signs that hint at an entirely different purpose and use of land that lies in the heart of this green space (Slide 2).

As we move around the high security zone in the center, we come across more signs and installations that signify the true nature of this 'natural' environment (Slide 4). There are groundwater-testing wells, which monitor the levels of radioactive contamination in the groundwater, and an air quality monitoring station that is supposed to trigger the sirens. Within these signs and installations the spirit of the land, its *genius loci*, presents its cycle of death and rejuvenation (Slide 4). This is seen most vividly through the old and new definitions of the boundaries that you can or cannot cross. The new bright yellow 'no trespassing' signs proudly defend the frontiers, while the older signs are overgrown with vegetation and other natural forces. At the end of this tangential road, we come to a concrete bolder blocking the road. This is where Google's pervading 'street view' stops. Beyond the roadblock is one of the sites where the nuclear contamination was first detected in 1988 (Slide 5). The lush vegetation hides everything beyond the roadblock, inviting and intimidating at the same time. It was only on the more recent visits that I managed to penetrate this green barrier, only to re-confirm the continual invisibility of the true nature of this space. Its nuclear history also unfolds in the celebratory murals on the floodwalls of the Paducah riverfront. The

murals, painted in 1996, present an amnesic view, selectively remembering the glory days, and conveniently forgetting the contaminations from the same past (Slide 6).

The experience of attraction and repulsion embedded in the Kentucky Wildlife Management Area, for me, mimics the paradoxical experience of migration to a foreign land. From outside, the prospective life in the new country looks promisingly attractive. Only at close inspection, and through extended experience does the immigrant become aware of the complexity of the new land and its culture. The West Kentucky Wildlife Management Area forms an exaggerated but appropriate model of this experience. Just as the radioactive contamination underlying these lands cannot be seen in the photographs but only hinted at, indirectly, through a series of signifiers, my experience, as an immigrant, of the American cultural environment can be fully comprehended only against the backdrop of a number of bureaucratic rituals. To name but a few: keeping and proving the legal status, filing taxes, visa applications, and interviews, renewing driving licenses, and keeping a log of every border crossing. These rituals symbolize the unseen and unwritten forces that shape the immigrant's sense of place. In this regard, the process of photographing in the Kentucky Wildlife Management Area not only revealed to me an aspect of the human-environment relationship but also simulated the gradual formation of my identity as an immigrant.

Off Road Vehicle Parks

Given the nature of formal and legal identity imposed on the immigrant (working in the United States) by the non-immigrant visa regulations, her/his sense of self is framed by her/his professional environment. Within the utilitarian environment of the workplace the immigrant feels at-home, functioning as a productive individual. Only in the time and space outside of this professional engagement does the cultural dislocation of the immigrant become evident. It is the time and space of leisure or recreation that underscores the alien in the legal title 'Non Resident Alien.' Concerning the second series of photographs, I was curious about a certain form of recreational activities prevalent in the US – adventure-sports. I specifically focused on the spaces dedicated to the human need for risk or the 'adrenaline rush,' and the way we shape the landscape in the pursuit of both. The concept of adventure-sports has been difficult for me to understand. Having grown up in Mumbai, a city of 12 million people, where daily life itself provides many life-threatening adventures, it is difficult for me to imagine an additional need for risk and possible enjoyment of it. My work explores the natural environments, such as off-road-vehicle parks, that are especially maintained (in the desired state of wilderness) for the sole purpose of adventure-sports. These parks provide the opportunity of driving monstrous vehicles on rugged terrains that can be difficult even to climb on foot. There are plenty of such parks in the US, maintained by the state governments (similar to the state parks or wildlife refuges) and a lot more privately owned. I look at these spaces as manifestations of a cultural process (as variously suggested by J. B. Jackson). Through the process of photography I attempt to decode the image of American society that I find mirrored in the landscapes dedicated to its recreation. On the surface, these parks seem to integrate the cultural affinity for automobiles and individualistic recreational desires. And upon more careful observation the function of these spaces reveals a culturally specific attitude towards the environment (Slide 7).

As the site for adventure-sports these lands are desired and designed to pose a peculiar challenge. The most interesting aspects of the adventure-sports practised on an off-road-

vehicle park concern the virtual lack of rules of the game, and the main opponent in the game seems to be Nature itself. Here the historic attitude towards natural environments can be seen in its radically revised form.

In *Common Landscape of America 1580-1845* John Stilgoe provides a historic account of the European sentiments towards natural surroundings. Referring to the brutal death that Snow White is submitted to in the German folktale, Stilgoe mentions:

In the folk imaginations of the Middle Ages the forest is a logical setting for such atrocity. After all, it is a great chaos, the lair of wild beast and wilder men, where order and shaping are not, where hapless peasants are first *be-wildered*, then seduced into all manner of sin. The very vastness of the disorder, leaches away the peasant's reserve of reason and self control; he confuses freedom with license, and succumbs to the animal appetite latent in all men. (Stilgoe 1982, 7)

Driven by their opportunistic ideals in the new world, the Europeans considered the wilderness as land to be tamed and controlled. Seen from this historic perspective one can find the natural spaces (with their assumed relation to chaotic dark forces) as the perfect scene for the adventure-sports, suitable for compensating the adrenaline deficiency from which the First World Countries suffer. There is an interesting paradox that I noticed in these environments: these spaces are chosen for human play because of their 'natural' setting, and yet through human engagement they are shaped and reshaped continuously. For example, large boulders are layered in order to create rugged terrains, vegetation that comes in the path of the 'off road vehicles' is mended routinely, and inclines erode under the grip of tough tires creating deep trenches. In this way, these spaces eventually lose any trace of the true wilderness and only exhibit topography suitable to human excitement. Through engagement in this landscape I have attempted to understand the commodification (commodification being a symptom of contemporary culture) form of the fear of the unknown (Slide 8).

These ongoing bodies of works began as an excuse for familiarizing myself with the surrounding environment. Over the years I have assumed that this process of image making can be a catalyst in the 'naturalization' of the immigrant. It provides a way to acclimatize not only the vision, but also other faculties that can read cultural stimuli. The photographic process is inherently an act of framing, selection, and signification. Conferring such significance on a certain site, or a vision, is also the first step in the search for the reality underlying appearances. The specific methodology of working with a large format camera is central to the effect of the photographic process. This process is much slower than the 'point and shoot' manner of capturing reality. In a way it is a meditative experience. The large format camera, with its inverted and mirrored projection on the ground glass, uniquely allows for an extended view of the subject. It provides a slightly abstracted and formal engagement with the reality, which aligns with the detached perspective afforded by the immigrant's status. Initially I expected that the photographic engagement would create new anchor points within the new landscape that could (even if falsely) replace the visions and experiences from my former life in Mumbai, India. Thus memory has been an integral part of my creative process. In this context the new visions were always evaluated through the prism of memories and past visions. But over the years, on every visit to Mumbai, I realized that the past views, constituting this prism are exponentially vanishing. Without the physical reference points from the past to compare with the new experiences, I find myself to be an outsider, equally in the host and the home countries. This could be compared to the sentiment expressed in D. H. Lawrence's remark "one can no longer say: I'm a stranger everywhere, only everywhere I'm at home" (Lawrence 1989, 266). It is this sense of suspension of identity, rather than the

desire for acclimatization, which is the new norm that arouses my curiosity about my new surroundings.

As I have continued to observe environments in the US and in Mumbai, India, I am no more anxious about creating any psychological ties with them. With this detached yet curious perspective the scope of my investigations has broadened. Through the two bodies of works under study in this article I have focused on how I relate to my new surroundings, and the way the photographic engagement has assisted my acclimatization. However, in the future I am planning to investigate how natural and constructed environments in general contribute to shaping specific social, cultural, and national identities. I see this as a positive development that will allow my work to address the issues and concepts beyond the confines of my own experiences.



(Slide 1) Evergreen Near Nuclear Enrichment Plant, WMA, Kentucky



(Slide 2) Welcome Warning, WMA, Kentucky



(Slide 3) Air Monitoring Station, WMA, Kentucky



(Slide 4) Old Order, WMA, Kentucky



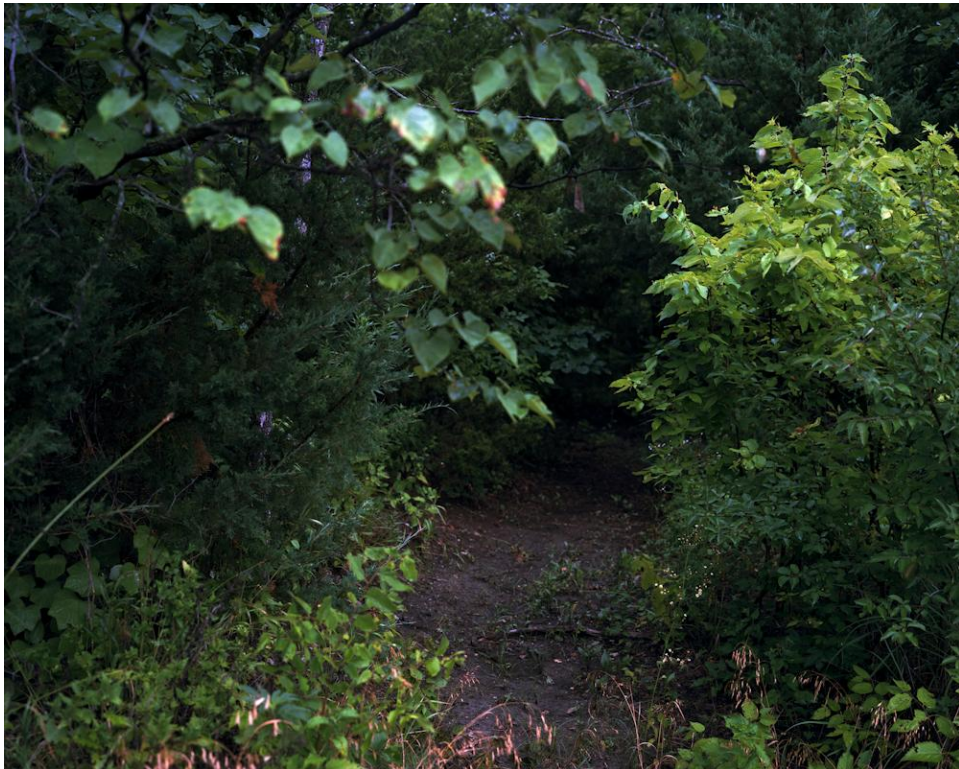
(Slide 5) Roadblock, Nuclear Contamination Site, WMA, Kentucky



(Slide 6) Coal Engine Arriving At Atomic City, Paducah, Kentucky



(Slide 7) Concrete Terrain, Linear Trail, Kansas



(Slide 8) Occurrence #6, ORV Park, Kansas

Bibliography

- ADLER, Margot (2006), *Behind the Ever-Expanding American Dream House*, [radio], NPR All Things Considered, July 6, 2006) [Online] Available on: <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5525283>> (accessed on March 1, 2014)
- Radioactive Waste Management Associates (2004) *Danger Lurks Below: The Threat to Major Water Supplied from US Department of Energy Nuclear Weapons Plants*, [Online] Available on: <http://www.rwma.com/ANA_Final.pdf> (accessed on May 20, 2011)
- LAWRENCE, David H. (1989), *The letters of D.H. Lawrence*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP.
- STILGOE, John R. (1982), *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845*, New Haven, Yale UP.

Biographic Information

Shreepad Joglekar was born in Solapur, India. He holds a BFA from Sir J.J. Institute of Applied Art in Mumbai, India, and an MFA from Texas Tech University. Joglekar has participated in residencies at Weir Farm National Historic Site in Branchville, CT, the Millay Colony for the Arts in Austerlitz, NY, and A.I.R. Studio in Paducah, KY. His recent exhibitions include *American Sites* at Kalamazoo College Gallery in Kalamazoo, and *Filtered Permeability* at Indiana University Southeast in New Albany. His work has also been shown in several galleries in the US, Canada, China, Germany, India, and the United Kingdom. He has lectured on his photographic work at interdisciplinary conferences, through panel discussions and image-maker presentations, in the US, France, and the United Kingdom. Exploring natural, cultural, and intellectual environments has been a dominant theme in his work. Joglekar is currently Assistant Professor and Area Coordinator for Photography at Kansas State University.

Notice biographique

Sheepad Joglekar est né à Solapur en Inde. Il est détenteur d'un Bachelor of Fine Arts (Licence d'arts plastiques) de l'Institut Sir J.J. d'Arts Appliqués à Mumbai, ainsi que d'un Master of Fine Arts (Master d'arts plastiques) de l'Université de Texas Tech. Joglekar a été résident au Site Historique de Weir Farm National à Brancheville dans le Connecticut, à la Millay Colony (domaine artistique) à Austerlitz dans l'état de New York, et au Studio des Artistes en Résidence à Paducah dans le Kentucky. Ses dernières expositions en date comprennent *American Sites* à la galerie de Kalamazoo College, ainsi que *Filtered Permeability* à l'Université Southeast dans l'Indiana à New Albany. Son œuvre a également été exposée dans plusieurs galeries d'arts au Canada, en Chine, en Allemagne, en France, et au Royaume-Uni, en plus des États-Unis. Il a donné des conférences sur son œuvre photographique à l'occasion de discussions et de présentations de fabrication d'images aux États-Unis, en France et au Royaume-Uni. Le thème dominant de son œuvre concerne l'exploration des environnements naturel, culturel, et intellectuel. Joglekar est actuellement Maître de Conférences et coordonnateur du département de la photographie à l'Université d'état du Kansas.