

Landscape and the West: Irony and Critique in New Topographic Photography

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Whereas Ansel Adams photographed the sinuous, abstract patterns left by timeless winds on desert sand dunes (*Sand Dunes, Oceano, California*, c. 1950), New Topographics photographer Robert Adams's photograph of a similar western scene turns out to be dune-buggy tracks crisscrossing the desert floor (*East of Eden, Colorado*, 1977). Landscape photographs by Ansel Adams helped reinforce the image of the American West as an unspoiled wilderness throughout the Cold War era; by contrast, during the post-Vietnam war era, western landscape photography by New Topographic photographers challenged the ideology of such longstanding myths of nature and the West.

Indeed, Robert Adams, along with Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, Art Sinsabaugh, and other New Topographics photographers, represented *not* the pristine western landscape of national parks' propaganda and of the Hollywood Western¹; rather, they focused on the “man-altered landscape” (Jenkins, 1975): tract houses seemingly constructed in the middle of nowhere; a drive-in movie screen silhouetted against Pike's Peak and even blending in with the latter's profile; roadways, road-kill, and burning oil sludges. New Topographics photography questioned the supposed distinction between cultural and natural landscapes. In doing so, the New Topographics photographers often formally refer to and ironize past images of “pristine” wilderness, such as those by nineteenth-century U.S. Geological Survey photographers Wm. Henry Jackson and Carlton Watkins from the earliest days of western expansion; as well as post-war images by West Coast landscape photographers Edward Weston and Ansel Adams of the f/64 group. New Topographics photography works powerfully—and with considerable irony—to question the validity of the centuries-old distinction between nature and culture in some of the West's most mythologized imagery.

Yet despite the influence of New Topographics on subsequent generations of landscape photographers, little serious scholarship exists on their work. To date, the most significant and lengthy treatment of the New Topographics remains photographer and critic Deborah Bright's 1985 essay, “Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Man” (1993). As part of a series of essays on the ideological constructions of landscape and the American West (1990, 1991), Bright's 1985 essay positioned New Topographics within the vicissitudes of the art market. Querying “Why landscape *now*?” Bright observed that

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representations of landscape historically have served “an upper-crust cultivated taste for aestheticized nature” (1993, p. 127). She justifiably invoked the renaissance of the art market at the end of the 1970s—a commercial rebirth coming after nearly a decade of non-object oriented art movements critical of art’s institutionalization and corporate consumption, including performance, video, and conceptual art—as one context for the aesthetic consumability of the New Topographics landscape photographs.

Contextualizing the works within the conservative turn in American culture and politics in the 1980s, Bright also accused New Topographics photographers of occluding increasing corporate dominance over the “social and physical environment” under then-President Ronald Reagan. Ultimately, Bright indicted New Topographic photographers for failing to historicize their subject and for neglecting to articulate a clear social critique. Their status as mere “art objects” diminished any social concern the photographers might otherwise have intended.

Yet much of the western “expansion” pictured by the New Topographics photographs consists of mobile homes, impoverished former boomtowns, lower-middle-class housing tracts, and other signs of the lost American Dream still conventionally signified by the West. While far from overt or obvious, the images also neither sentimentalize “nature” nor simply condemn these interlopers on the Western landscape. Although I am indebted to Bright’s sustained social history of landscape photography, it does not adequately register the significant ironic dimension of New Topographics and the role of that irony in the historicizing of “postmodern” art and photography. This essay proposes to reconsider the function of irony in New Topographics photography in order to place the works within another dimension of their historical context. The photographs’ brief, non-descriptive titles, their sometimes serial installation, their clear lack of moral judgment, and the fact that many were initially published in the then-new phenomenon of photo books, all positioned these photographs not only within an art market, as Bright insists, but within a related art movement: that is, not just as art photography but as Conceptual photography.

New Topographics photographers such as Baltz, Robert Adams, Frank Gohlke, Joe Deal, and Stephen Shore, among others, acquired their name from a 1975 exhibition at the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, *New Topographics*, and subtitled, *Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*. The exhibition’s title was clearly a nod to nineteenth-century topographic photography under the initial exploratory auspices of the U.S. Geological Survey, as well as an acknowledgment of the alteration of that terrain during the century intervening—an acknowledgement missing from mid-century photographs by Ansel Adams. An art book titled *Landscape: Theory* published by Lustrum Press in 1980, which included a number of the New Topographics photographers, helped cement their prominence. Guggenheim awards and the blessings of art photography doyen and Museum of Modern Art’s head photographic curator John Szarkowski secured the group’s place in the annals of art and landscape photography, as well as in the photography art market.

Yet virtually lost to this history of the New Topographics photography’s fine arts pedigree is the fact that the Rochester exhibition of the New Topographics photographers, curated by William Jenkins, specified a debt to the deadpan photographic series of Conceptual artist Edward Ruscha. To paraphrase curator Jenkins, it is not what Ruscha’s photographs are *of* so much as it is what they are *about* (Jenkins, 1975, p.5). Though Ruscha’s photographs were *of* gas stations along Route 66 or *of* every building on the Sunset Strip, they were *about* a series of aesthetic issues: as

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photographer John Schott has asserted, “[Ruscha’s pictures] are not statements about the world through art, they are statements about art through the world” (cited in Jenkins, 1975, p.5).

Similarly, while New Topographic photographs appear to be of western landscapes, trees, deserts, houses, roads, and construction, they are nonetheless *about* the aesthetic discourse of landscape photography, and about “a man-made wilderness” (Ratliff, 1976, p.86): that is, they are *about* the American myths of the West, suburban expansion, the American dream, and the exploitation and destruction of natural resources. Although Bright observed that “[b]eauty, preservation, development, exploitation, regulation...are historical matters in flux, not essential conditions of landscape”; nonetheless, they *are* essential conditions of the cultural construction of “landscape”; conditions, as Bright would doubtless agree, serving specific political and even ideological ends.

VISUAL TROPES

While American western expansion in the 1870s was in part encouraged as a means to help unify North and South in the wake of the Civil War, western expansion after World War II was part of the newly-affluent, newly-mobile middleclass tourist experience. The “aesthetics” of this experience in photographs by Ansel Adams, as Bright observed, was “well suited to the conservative social climate of a post-World War II United States basking in its reborn Manifest Destiny as a world superpower” (Bright, 1993, p.129; 1990).²

Well-versed in this American landscape tradition from the U.S. Geological Survey photographs by William Henry Jackson and Carlton Watkins to the now-iconic post-war western landscapes of Ansel Adams, New Topographics photographers appropriated many of the formal compositional elements by which landscape photography—and even landscape painting before it—was known.

For example, the traditional horizontal, “landscape” format that takes its name from the genre and intended to imply the endless sweep of land beyond the picture’s frame, in many of the photographic canvases of Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz square, instead emphasizes the domestic containment of the land. Further, landscape’s traditional midline placement of the horizon for compositional balance between earth and sky is often repositioned by New Topographics photographers above or below midline, or is even absent, rendering the landscape cluttered, unbalanced, or constrained rather than pristine and endless. The use of foliage to frame a distant view, which early U.S.G.S. topographic photographers such as Carlton Watkins borrowed from eighteenth-century romantic landscape painting, as well as to give a sense of scale; is rendered by Robert Adams in *On Signal Hill overlooking Long Beach, California* (1983) as pathos—the tree in the foreground is not only dwarfed by the enormous sprawl of the city behind it, but it also acts as a lone and pathetic reminder of what has been displaced by urban development.

Other recognizable landscape photography conceits utilized by Ansel Adams and Edward Weston included a point of view chosen to occlude any presence of humans, including the photographer himself, in order to maintain the fantasy of a wilderness untouched by man. By contrast, in Robert Adams’s *On Lookout Mountain, next to Buffalo Bill’s grave, Jefferson County, Colorado* (1970), for example, the photographer’s perspective from far-flung cliffs includes graffiti, demonstrating that there are few places,

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regardless how remote, where humans have not been or not marked by their presence. Visual tropes of nature, such as landscape photography's inclusion of bodies of water for mirrored symmetry, fertility, and preternatural calm are all fodder for compositional parody by the New Topographics. Instead, man-made roads, tunnels, and byways break up the land rather than superimpose symmetry upon the view of the land; and mysterious, natural phenomena, such as steam rising from the sulphur springs that first fascinated the U.S. Geological Survey photographers such as W. H. Jackson in 1875 is, in Lewis Baltz's *Sunflower Condominiums During Construction, Looking West* (1978), not steam from a mysterious, preternatural source, but the dust from new construction. Note, too, that whereas photograph titles used by the U.S.G.S. that incorporate cardinal direction ("looking west") ostensibly for orientation nonetheless managed to instill "west" as a distinctly American concept; the New Topographics photographer's similar use of topographic titling laconically acknowledges cardinal orientation as the contemporary developer's dream of open, profitable land.

Indeed, such specific and even famous photographs as Ansel Adams's *Moonrise over Hernandez, New Mexico* (1944) are invoked by Robert Adams's *Fort Collins, Colorado* (1976) some 30 years later in order to show us suburban habitation illuminated by that same moon—a parking lot that holds surrounding undeveloped land at bay while importing a small, cordoned bit of nature within itself for decorative and humanistic purposes. Robert Adams's photograph even slyly suggests that the moon is the source for what in fact turns out to be artificial illumination by a nearby streetlamp.

The irony of these photographs, as Jenkins suggests of Ruscha, is that they are *of* landscape but *about* the discursive construction of landscape and the literal destruction of the land, a kind of irony that is part of the *modus operandi* of conceptual art. Though irony has been considered at length in literary studies—as a trope, a device, and a mode—it has generated little more than passing commentary in art history and criticism.³ Irony remains Conceptual art's primary legacy for contemporary art and photography, yet the phenomenon is little understood by the scholars and critics who acknowledge its appearance in art since the Vietnam War.

ROMANTIC OR POSTMODERN IRONY?

I would venture to say here that it is the work's irony that both frustrates Bright's own social agenda—as it did many critics in the 1980s—and is the defining characteristic New Topographics photography. I would further argue that it is the irony itself that, in New Topographics photography, expands what Bright characterizes as landscape photography's "narrow, self-reflexive project," though it does so in a more opaque fashion than perhaps she would prefer. Bright's reluctance to acknowledge the work of irony in New Topographic landscapes is symptomatic of art and culture of the United States from the 1980s onward.

For the culture of the United States is one that does not much care for irony or ethical ambiguity. Photography, despite more than a century's evidence of easy manipulation, nonetheless remains a medium from which we expect transparency. We are, perhaps, never more frustrated than when the photograph fails to tell us what it means or is *about* something other than what it is a picture *of*. I would argue that the ethical ambiguity of these works critiques us more than Bright acknowledges: Robert Adams's cropping of the word "Frontier" on his photograph of a Colorado gas station ("*Frontier*" gas station and Pikes Peak, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 1969) forces us to

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complete the word that might otherwise have been so obvious as to be overlooked. In so doing, we have the opportunity to acknowledge that we have always been complicit both in the frontier myth of the West and in its destruction. Thus, as the late Craig Owens asserted, irony “is a *negative* trope calculated to expose false consciousness” (Owens, 1992, p.149).

Photographs by New Topographics photographers indisputably romanticize their subject, for all that they reflect the depredations of the landscape. As a Westerner who grew up during the period chronicled by the New Topographics, and in daily contact with the vestiges of the West’s unfulfilled American Dream pictured by them, I admittedly want to defend these photographs against what is, in part, the detached Easterner’s pointed and justifiably impassioned social criticism. The New Topographics’ coupling of nascent cynicism with formal aesthetics “risks,” as Charles Hagen observed in a review of Baltz’s work, “lapsing into a weary disgust that, in a perverse transformation, could almost become acceptance—the limpid Western light, which in many ways has always been Baltz’s real subject, gilds equally junk and land, detritus and sky. But Baltz’s spare formal vocabulary keeps the pictures from sinking into sentimentality” (Hagen, 1989). Indeed, the laconic irony of many of the photographs preserves their romanticism—the era from which, after all, modern irony stemmed—while reminding us of the true definition of nostalgia—to long for a version of the past that never truly existed.

Moreover, does the New Topographics photographers’ “failure” to judge for us in the photographs relieve *us* of that responsibility?⁴ Might not the ethical ambiguity of the works themselves function as a critical tool, as many have argued about Conceptual and postmodern art, and thus more firmly implicate us in their critique of ideology? My interest in the New Topographics is part of an ongoing interest in the fate of ideology critique itself under post-industrial capitalism’s rampant and pervasive commodification of it. Indeed, given the increasing omnipresence and vacuity of form under our corporate culture industry, much of postmodern art, like the post-structuralist critique to which it is often linked, takes form and formal issues as its point of entry.⁵ My own interest in the New Topographics, some 20 years after Bright’s essay, anticipates, perhaps, the possibility of a larger renewed interest signaled by the 2005 acquisition of Robert Adams’s photographic oeuvre by Yale University, as well as the popularity of “new” naturalist writing by authors such as Barbara Kingsolver (2001) and Michael Pollan (1991, 2002), and an increase in art historical scholarship on previously overlooked artists and movements from the sixties and seventies (Kwon, 2004; Lee, 2006, 2001; Molesworth, 2003). Indeed, whereas Ansel Adams’s work remains a popular subject for coffee table books and an adornment of Sierra Club wall and engagement calendars, few today outside the art world and cultural élite are familiar with New Topographics.

The false consciousness exposed by the New Topographics’ irony is that the West was ever pristine, ever uninhabited: Even the nineteenth-century photographer, to get his view, left footprints (Banham, 1987, p.5). The false consciousness exposed by the New Topographic’s irony is, perhaps, that these photographs are less about the “man-altered landscape” than what California cultural and architectural historian Reyner Banham called the “man-mauled desert” (1987, p.2). The photographs are often beautiful not only because of the photographer’s eye, although Szarkowsky and others would have us believe this the whole story, but because we can be moved by such naked juxtapositions of human exploitation and the beauty of the constructed landscape—all we have ever truly known of nature despite a century’s worth of landscape photographs that have attempted to convince us otherwise. Indeed, as

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Banham further suggests, the “irony is that this beauty is itself a product of careless human ambition” (1987, pp.4-5).

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¹ The most important essay outlining these histories is Bright, D. (1993), as part of a series of projects addressing the ideological currency of landscape in the post-war United States. See also Bright (1992; 1990).

² The aesthetics of Adams’s photographs also indirectly served post-war petroleum, automobile, and lead industries in their drive to expand automobile dominance by destroying mass transit and alternative and safe fuels (Mintz 2006, Kitman, 2000).

³ The exception is Craig Owens work (1992), esp. pp. 52-87.

⁴ Compare Roland Barthes regarding the dispossession of viewer judgment in “shock-photos” (Barthes, 1979, pp.71-73).

⁵ This essay is part of the author’s larger project on irony and aesthetics in Western landscape photography.

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