4

Landscape in Photography

Perhaps even more than the portrait, landscape photography remains encoded within the language of academic painting and the traditions of landscape art which developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Talbot's use of the camera lucida in an attempt to draw a landscape scene in Switzerland not only underlies the concern with accuracy, the depiction of a particular locale, but lays stress on the implicit relationship between painting and photography in its depiction of landscape. Photography emerged at a time when painters were not only seeking a new realism of the kind we find in the work of the Barbizon School, and when western cultures were establishing a new awareness of the processes of the natural world, what John Ruskin called 'a science of the aspect of things'; it also emerged at a time of the continuing exploration and settlement of new lands. The photograph allowed the land to be controlled, visually at least—to be scaled and ordered, in the way that white colonial settlement attempted politically. But a photograph's ability to record a scene was equally matched by the increasing concern with light and time, which was to reach its apogee in the work of the Impressionists. By implication, a medium whose name meant 'light writing' was well suited to the instant recording of natural process and energy.

But the photograph also established itself at a time when the landscape, especially in England, was viewed through a highly developed and popular picturesque aesthetic. The notion of the 'picturesque' established a series of ideal images and terms of reference by which a landscape scene was to be judged and deemed appropriate for inclusion in a painting or a photograph. The picturesque tourist sought out ideal scenes according to specific assumptions; an outlook that became almost pervasive. In this sense landscape was not viewed so much in relation to its natural features as to the way it offered images of a rural idyll quite at odds with the reality. As a cultural index, the picturesque thus sought visual confirmation of a timeless Arcadia; a unified image of social life.[1]

Landscape photography, certainly within the British tradition and, in different ways, in the American context, has moved between these two poles of reference. On the one hand, photographing the basic elements of nature in its concern with particulars (trees, flowers, and so

Detail of 30

23 Roger Fenton

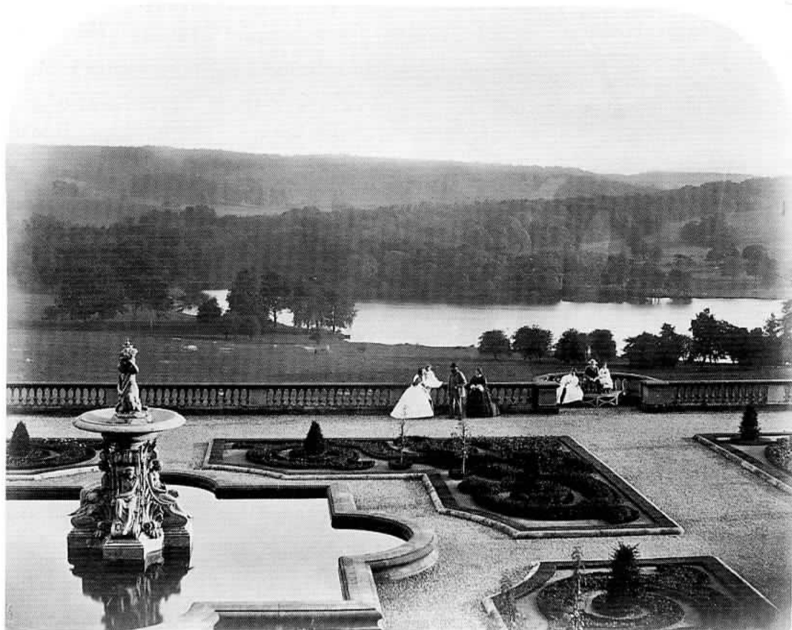
Mill at Hurst Green, 1859

Roger Fenton's landscape photographs remain very much within the picturesque tradition. This image is a postcard for the nineteenth century. It views the village as part of a pastoral tradition. In relation to such writers as Thomas Hardy, Fenton's response remains idealized and touristic. Note the way the figures pose for the camera. There is no evidence of work, nor of poverty and hardship. The viewpoint confirms the imposed 'unity' of the scene.

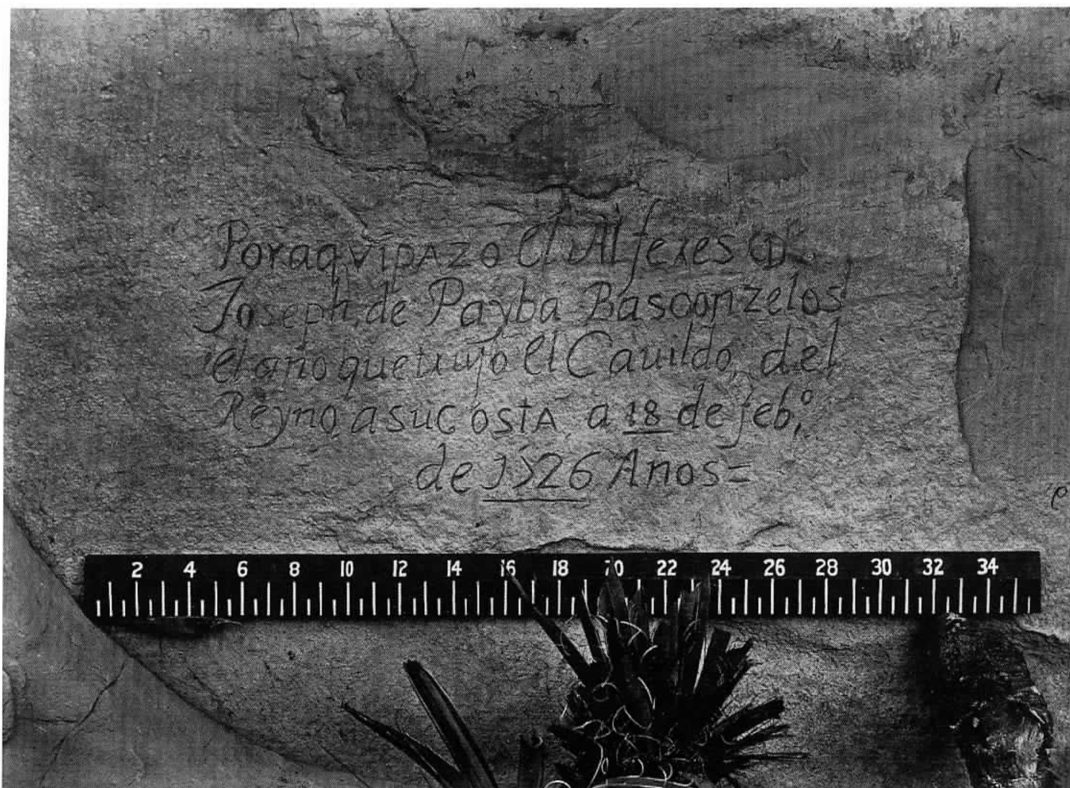
on) and change (light, water, sky, and the seasons); and on the other, seeking out quintessential images of rural harmony—pastoral scenes of a postcard culture. This is obvious, for example, in much nineteenth-century English photography, especially in relation to the work of Roger Fenton. In his approach to landscape Fenton both reflects a highly specific cultural vocabulary based on literature and painting, and does so in relation to specific social codes and assumptions. Indeed, this sense of the photographer as privileged tourist is underscored by the way Fenton often photographed established tourist areas which had already been depicted in painting (and literature). His photographs feed from the vocabulary of tourism, and structure themselves according to their representation in painting. His images thus reflect the leisurely assumptions of a class of people who looked upon landscape scenery in aesthetic and philosophical terms; part of a picturesque tradition that was as much the product of William Gilpin as it was of Richard Wilson, Thomas Gainsborough, and John Constable. Theirs was an image of Britain at peace with itself. Whether it be the country estate, the village, or the country lane, the land seemingly reflected a social harmony and beauty equivalent to an assumed natural unity. They looked on approvingly; as Roger Fenton declared, the English sought images of 'the peaceful village, the unassuming church . . . the gnarled oak . . .': all central icons of harmony, and he responded accordingly.

Fenton's landscape photographs offer an almost definitive index of Victorian attitudes to landscape.[2] *Mill at Hurst Green* (1859) [**23**], for example, suggests a quintessential English village scene, and views its subject from the point of view of the tourist, as a pastoral alternative to the vicissitudes of urban life. In such scenes Fenton records selected spots of space and imposes a hierarchy of significance on the land which guides the way he frames the subject. The result is to construct a highly edited version of rural England—exclusive and bound by mythology, rather than by the social reality that it encountered. Such landscapes show none of the observation or intimate knowledge of the kind we find in the writing of Thomas Hardy or that we would associate with a documentary photography of rural life. As *The Terrace and Park at Harewood House* (1860) [**24**] reflects, the vantage point is as much social as it is physical. The eye confirms a conservative view of a unified picture. There is nothing which disturbs the pleasure of the eye as it looks out on to the prospect. Fenton confirms cultural privilege and, in so doing, records cultural myth.

There is, for example, no evidence of work in a Fenton photograph. Even at Hurst Green the figures have been stilled and turned into objects of curiosity. They are there to confirm their place within the fixed scheme of things. To allow their actual terms of existence into the meaning of the picture would be to expose the myth to historical analysis, a social realism inimical to the aesthetic embedded within the image. Such a view, endemic to much English photography, was continued by those English travellers who moved abroad to image 'foreign' landscapes. Here too, an alien landscape is not so much



24 Roger Fenton
The Terrace and Park at Harewood House, 1860
A Fenton image which reflects a privileged position from the security of the country house. This confirms the status of the country estate at the time. The figures look out upon a made and controlled landscape; an Arcadia which seeks the values of Claude and Poussin and rejects anything which might question the eye's pleasure in the scene.



25 Timothy O'Sullivan

Inscription Rock, New Mexico, 1873

Although not a landscape, this image by O'Sullivan reflects American concerns in relation to the western areas of the United States throughout the nineteenth century. The measure in the photograph is an icon of the very act of surveying (associated with O'Sullivan's trip) and the need to bring such a massive area of land under political and cultural control.

photographed in relation to its own meaning or cultural difference, as it is brought within the frame of the picturesque and touristic. 'Foreignness' is made safe according to established terms of reference reflected in the photograph's composition and treatment of subject. Like Fenton, for example, Francis Frith and John Thomson reflect a series of highly selective vantage-points and photograph according to the tastes and values of their 'home' audience.

In the United States, whilst somewhat dependent on English models, photography (much like painting and literature) rapidly established its own terms of reference related to the settlement of the continent and the vast spaces that the eye had to measure and contain. The idyllic Arcadia of Fenton's images was hardly appropriate to a frontier culture, nor could it suggest the cultural symbolism embodied in the plains, prairies, deserts, and mountains that the American photographer encountered.

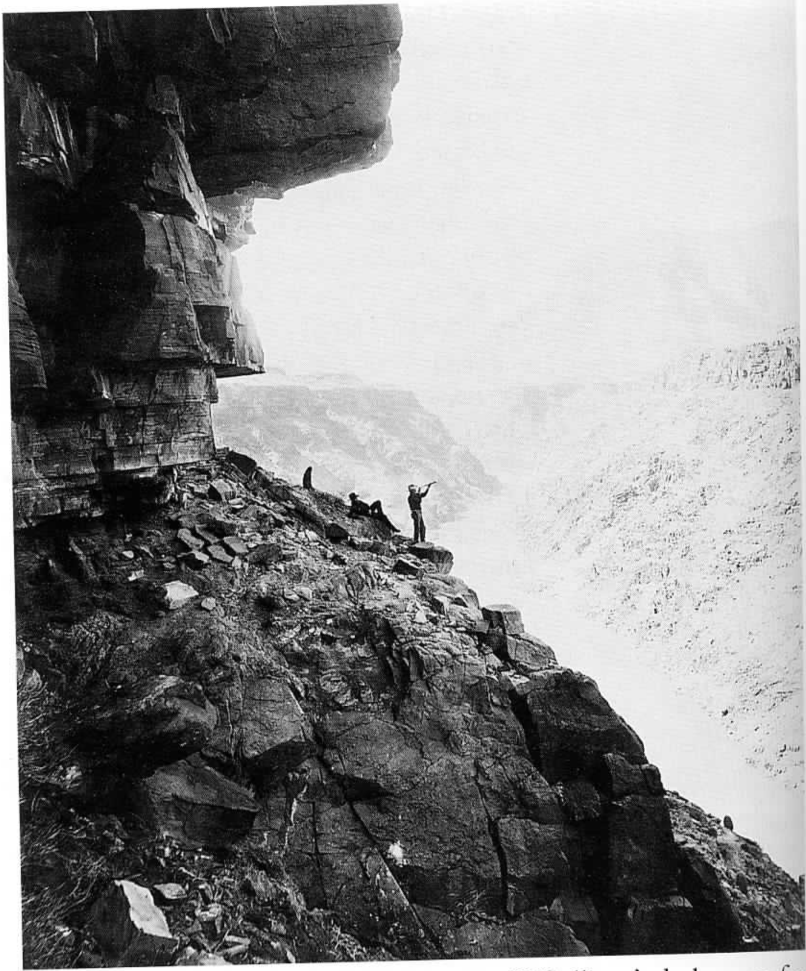
Timothy O'Sullivan (1840–82) is an exemplary figure in this development. O'Sullivan was involved in a number of government expeditions to the western territories and photographed the scenery of Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico. These were extreme landscapes, sublime in scale and presence (the Grand Canyon) and bereft of evidence of settlement (the Nevada Desert). The eye, as it were, looked upon a land denuded of cultural reference. Such terrains were to be

painted by the likes of Albert Bierstadt and Frederick Edwin Church in the same century, and in their use of intense colour and panoramic space extolled a grandeur which renders the scene sublime. Although O'Sullivan's black-and-white images hardly produce such an impact on the viewer, they do suggest distinctive aspects of how the photographer approached the land as subject. The very fact, for example, that they are scaled images reflects the wider and fundamental concern with any landscape photograph: to establish an order bound by a cultural frame of reference; just as in these images we see reflected the processes of exploration and settlement. The eye scales and tracks the land as it establishes its own points of reference and the beginnings of a map of social and political control over 'nature'. *Inscription Rock, New Mexico* (1873) **[25]** is wonderfully suggestive of precisely the tension at the centre of landscape photography as a genre.[3]

In a similar way, *Desert Sand Hills Near Sink of Carson, Nevada* (1867) **[26]** is a quintessential nineteenth-century American landscape image: a desert landscape in a state of continuous change which, in its very absence of any kind of configuration, resists definition (in a similar way American photographers were to be attracted to the American deserts in the twentieth century). In one sense this is an image of

26 Timothy O'Sullivan
Desert Sand Hills Near Sink of Carson, Nevada, 1867
An image characteristic of the deserts of western America. The contrast between the ephemeral nature of the sand and the temporary but distinctive tracks on its surface creates a distinctive series of paradoxes which underlie the culture's relationship to the land.

27 William Henry Jackson
Grand Canyon of the Colorado, 1883
Jackson's image achieves a monumental scale appropriate to its subject. The figures are dwarfed by the overwhelming presence of the natural scene. Note how one figure reclines in the typical pose of a tourist enjoying the scene while the other uses a telescope. They suggest the two extremes (aesthetic and scientific) of the American landscape tradition.

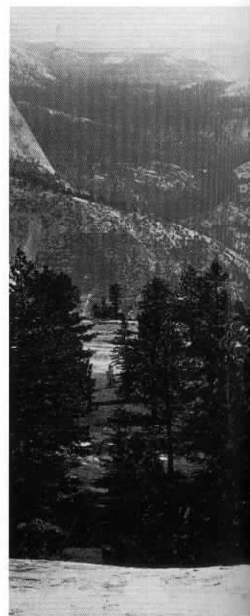


nature rather than landscape. The wagon (O'Sullivan's dark-room for his collodion prints) maps out a series of lines as potential codes and areas of delineation. They suggest the need to scale and measure, to order and control and, in turn, to place a historical code upon the land. The stark contrast between the human and the natural here moves the image through extreme states of meaning. Even O'Sullivan's footsteps in the sand hover between the denotative and connotative. Each mark insists on the settlers' relation to their land, and O'Sullivan, like the government he represents, is embarked on a mythic enterprise the very reverse of Fenton's: the mapping and imaging of a land as at once a physical reality, a national symbol, and an order of political and cultural control. To that extent the desert is here a white page on which the culture writes out its terms of reference.

Other American photographers of the period respond in similar ways, underscoring the extent to which much landscape photography of the period was part of a larger definition and sanctioning of nationhood and independence. William Henry Jackson (1843–1942),

for example, was also involved in government expeditions as well as instrumental in the establishment of national parks. His photographs reflect a sense of wonder that is to remain a key element in the American tradition. Often it is the sheer scale of the land that is celebrated, and an image like *Grand Canyon of the Colorado* (1883) [**27**] sets the terms of reference for much twentieth-century American landscape photography. The sublime qualities of the subject are obvious, and the two figures, whilst crucial to any sense of scale, elicit the double relationship to the land: one reclines, 'bathing' (in the Emersonian sense) in the pleasures of the scene; the other is alert and with a telescope, looking out over the land. He could almost be holding a camera. The very lack of human evidence in the scene adds to the effect. The scale is suggested by the way that the figures can only look at it. Once scaled down to size, attempts to order and control give way to an underlying sense of the spiritual; as in so much later landscape American imagery, the picture begins to suggest a religious element. Thus the figures exist amidst a wonderfully realized setting of light, rock, sky, and space. It suggests parallels with Asher B. Durand's nineteenth-century painting *Kindred Spirits*, but where that placed a poet and a painter at the centre of the scene, Jackson's image has a telescope.

The sense of space here is suggestive of its place within the American experience. A primary icon of the culture, American space is always both a physical reality and a symbolic presence, and yet it remains very much a problematic concern for the photographer. In the work of Carleton Watkins (1825–1916), for example, we can see this concern as basic to his approach. One of his continuing interests was the Yosemite, which he first visited in 1861 (publishing *Yosemite Valley: Photographic Views of the Fall and the Valley* in 1863). Like O'Sullivan and Jackson, he was involved in government expeditions and undertook geological surveys to California and, in 1876, photographed the railroad to Tucson, Arizona. His work exemplifies the nineteenth-century conflicts at the centre of the American response to landscape and the *land. Panorama of Yosemite Valley from Sentinel Dome* (1866) [**28**] is characteristic of his work, and extends the frame of the photograph to stress not merely the scale of the view but its expansiveness. This is a panorama, an image that *pans* over the landscape in a broad sweep, in order not so much to frame as to encompass the scene in its entirety. It recalls to us the popularity of panoramas in the United States but equally, and tantalizingly, the questions raised by a scenery that in its sheer scale questioned the photographer's attempt to reduce it to the frame of a photograph. Other images by Watkins are more quietist in tone and approach, stressing the continuing influence of Transcendentalism on the American's response to nature. At his most powerful, however,



28 Carleton Watkins
Panorama of Yosemite Valley from Sentinel Dome, 1866
The panorama was a popular form of public entertainment in the nineteenth century and was a precursor to the photograph. As its name suggests it offered for view *all* of the scene. The panorama, however, has a complex cultural meaning within the developing science of sight and is, above all, a circular experience as distinct from the linear frame of the photograph.

Watkins is a photographer who makes the act of structuring the land by the eye basic to his aesthetic. Whilst *A Storm on Lake Taho* (1880–5) approaches the stillness of Luminist painting, and of Alfred Stieglitz's images of Lake George, and *Cathedral Spires, Yosemite* (1861) declares itself as a precursor to such photographers as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, it is an image like *Cape Horn near Celilo, Oregon* (1867) [**29**] which is definitive Watkins.

This is both brooding and complex as an image. It lacks the spectacle and panoramic approach of the grander scenes, but in turn retains a distinctive sense of felt space as a primary factor of the American experience. Indeed, part of the effect is to displace 'space' in favour of emptiness, so that the land becomes an almost solitary arbiter in its own right. Emptiness overwhelms the eye—the sky (which occupies a third of the photographic space) is devoid of any significant presence. It has been emptied of effect. The rocks to the right offer an obvious contrast, but do so in relation to the 'benign' configuration of the valley on the left, in turn confirmed by the presence of the lake. There is an extraordinary sense of stillness in the image, very much a part of the American tradition. There are no figures, suggestive of the way the photograph creates its meaning through absence. All is anticipation, but equally all is balanced between meaning and a visual vacuum. Thus there is a peculiar modernity about the image, not in the way we find it in Friedlander or Garry Winogrand, for example, but in the 'landscape' studies of Jim Alinder (1941–), whose *Plymouth Rock* or *The Center of the United States* merely notate significant marks of settlement without any sense of cultural coherence. The railway-line and the telegraph poles suggest increasing settlement and control, but

they do so in terms of a linear geometry, much in the way that so much of the United States had a grid of local and state boundaries imposed upon it: thus the play between the natural and the political.

If settlement and political control over the land (and native cultures) has marked one major tradition of American landscape photography, so Transcendentalism has formed another. Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1835 essay *Nature* remains a basic text for this approach, as does Henry Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). As Transcendentalists, they stressed the holistic basis of natural forms and scenery, seeing in both the detail and the larger whole a symbolic state whose meaning implied the ideal presence of God. To look upon the land, whether as a prospect or in detail, was to commune with a visual hieroglyphic in which everything was part of a larger symbolic whole. In this approach the land as a natural form is alive with potential meaning, so that, like Blake, the photographer can see 'the world in a grain of sand'.

Every natural detail is of significance, for it reflects a universal condition.[4] Edward Weston's (1886–1958) brilliant *Dunes, Oceano (The Black Dome)* (1936) [**30**] is exemplary in the way it represents a series of definitive American landscape concerns. Once again, the photographer takes an extreme American terrain (a desert) and makes of it something other than its physical appearance. The camera transposes it as part of a larger mythology of spiritual and mysterious presence. Its two primary elements, sand and light, are both subject to continuous change, but the photograph fixes a moment from that continuum and celebrates it as part of a unity of time and space, without (on the surface) reference to the social or political. Where so

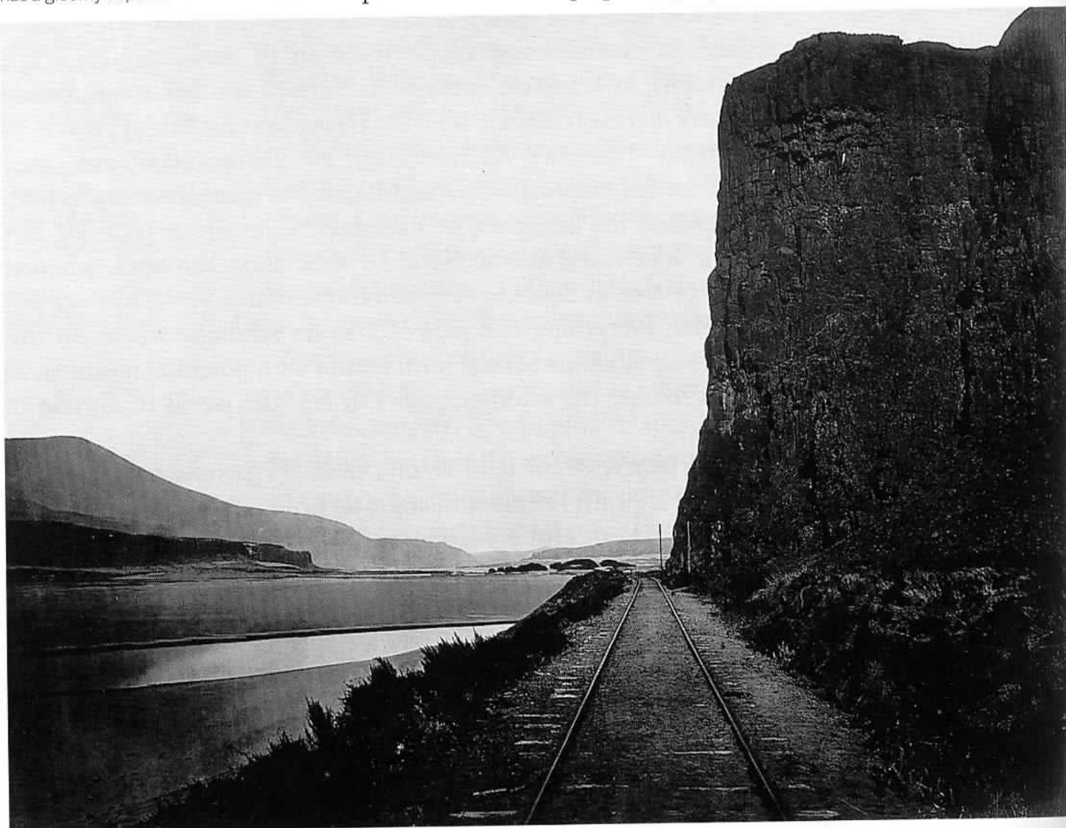
many photographers use water as a central element in a purist vocabulary of the spiritual, Weston has made the most barren of substances, sand, into something remarkable in its effect as a visual spectacle. The play of light and pattern, of texture and contrast, expresses an almost metaphysical presence.

Characteristically, Weston makes whatever elements of the natural he confronts into something distinctive. The camera transforms the scene and gives it significance through the intensity of its assumed vision. *Point Lobos* (1946) [**31**] may lack the grand scale, but it implies a grand vision. Its effect lies in the way every detail is given equal significance, a democratic insistence on the efficacy of the merest detail of nature which, in American terms, finds its literary base in the philosophy of Thoreau and Walt Whitman. Whereas *Dunes* made light and process its subject, so this addresses the solid presence and textures of natural objects. The camera photographs not just solid things but presences which, in their realized textures and surface feel, promise some kind of metaphysical revelation. Weston's approach is typical of American landscape photography, especially in the twentieth century. Whereas American documentary photographs saturate the photograph with human figures, landscape images empty the land of human presence. Landscape photographers choose those areas beyond

29 Carleton Watkins

Cape Horn near Celilo, Oregon, 1867

This is a sombre but tantalizing image. The obvious aspects of the photograph are the railway line and telegraph poles as part of a larger web of cultural control by American settlement. As such the sky is washed-out as if it mirrors what is happening. Likewise the rock on the right has a gloomy aspect.



30 Edward Weston

Dunes, Oceano, 1936

An image typical of Weston and the F.64 Group. The sand is turned into an abstract pattern which, in relation to the play of light, is offered as part of a 'perpetuum mobile'. The image suggests parallels with American Indian sand painting and the action painting of Jackson Pollock.

human habitation, extreme borderlands and national parks: pristine environments with as little evidence of human settlement as possible. In that sense they construct their own Arcadia, quite different from the English equivalent. Like the art photographer, they seek an ideal image in an ideal land.

Ansel Adams (1902–84), another major American photographer of the twentieth century, continues this search, but does so with a technical virtuosity which belies the historical context in which his work exists. *Moon and Mount McKinley* (1948) [**32**] is typical. An appropriate subject—for just as Mount McKinley is the highest mountain in the United States, so Adams seeks the 'highest' of meanings. The approach is such as to imbue the scene with a philosophical presence whose basis is, once again, the transcendental. There is not a trace of human activity. It is both a sublime sight and a pure scene; a pristine natural world which, in relation to its scale, evokes a mysterious otherness. In formal terms the image is organized according to a series of horizontal bands. In the foreground is a lowland area, in the middle ground foothills, followed by mountains and the sky. The eye ascends as it moves over the surface of the image. The effect is to create an ineffable sense of wonder, especially through the contrast of light and dark. Note, for example, how the cloud mirrors the mountain and how mass gives way to light and a sense of space. Adams is here the spectator recording the otherness of a world of mutual form and energy.

Adams, with Weston (and Stieglitz before them) forms the high point of a formal and ideal American landscape aesthetic. This tradition is continued in the work of Minor White (1908–76), another

31 Edward Weston

Point Lobos, 1946

Here the grand scale has given way to the minute and the particular. This is an image which celebrates small found objects in the natural scene. The texture in the image is crucial. Natural objects are given a mystical presence as part of a larger transcendental unity of being.

central figure, and in Robert Adams (1937–) too we can find a similar impulse, but here the terms of reference have changed. Whilst not assenting to their idealism and the aesthetics of what became known as the F.64 group (see Chapter 9), Adams carries many of the preoccupations of the nineteenth century into a postmodern context, revitalizing the terms of reference within a revised critical terminology. *Los Angeles, Spring* (1984) [**33**] is Watkins in the twentieth century. Compare it, for example, with [**29**]. The cliff on the left, with its bristles of thicket and grass, seems little more than the remnant of a lost nature, just as another Adams image, *The Garden of the Gods* (1977), casts America into a symbolic darkness. The sky is not only drained, it is smog-ridden. The middle ground is deceptive, for the more we look, the more it becomes part of an urban and industrial scene. Four pylons appear in mute profile on the horizon, linked to the wires which emanate from the cliff on the left. A road curves over the land in the centre. If it is spring, it is also Los Angeles, so that America, once the

'garden of the gods', has met its urban apotheosis. It is the landscape equivalent of Robert Frank's *The Americans*.

In contrast, British landscape photography of the twentieth century has followed a quite different path, and for the most part still finds its roots in the picturesque codes of the nineteenth century, although their efficacy is questioned by an increasing social awareness of how landscape should be read and the obvious sense of Britain as one of the most industrialized and populous landscapes anywhere in the world. The American can still, at least, contemplate a wilderness condition. In the British tradition the photographer is pushed to the margins of the landscape, using such habitats to recover a sense of isolation. The photographs make available icons of an alternative existence: primary spots of release and contemplation as if they, literally, stand in for a landscape that we rarely see but need to know.

For example, Fay Godwin (1931–), one of Britain's leading contemporary landscape photographers, releases the image of rugged upland areas from the aesthetic and cultural constrictions to be found in Fenton's work. *Land* (1985), like her *Forbidden Land* and Don McCullin's recent photographs of Somerset, takes as its subject desolate areas outside the domain of both the city and the suburb. This

32 Ansel Adams

Moon and Mount McKinley, 1984

An image of the grand scale in nature, this reflects the continuing sense of awe that the photographer brings to the natural scene. The primary elements—land, sky, water, mountains, and light—are imaged as part of a sublime union of the solid and the ephemeral. The photographer is once again the assumed arbiter of a natural world. The photograph, as such, reflects nature in its ideal state.

which resists a historical perspective. The scenes photographed remain as a tentative presence, lost, as it were, to the eye. And yet there is invariably a hint of human activity. In Don McCullin it might be a fence, a path, or a track. In Godwin it is more likely to be part of an archaeological trace: a land of runes and stone structures, monolithic rocks and sacred sites, so that the photographs engage with a continuing need to make sense of nature and its effect upon us. Godwin stands apart, using the camera to produce the evidence of past cultures on which her work is continuous. *Reedy Loch above Strathan* [**34**], for example, is perfectly suggestive of her approach and subject-matter and has about it an ambivalent and intense lyricism characteristic of her work. The primary elements of the scene are held in a delicate balance which hints at, but never fulfils, the promise of a meaning beyond what we see. The photographs seek an imagery of feeling but effectively offer the ghost of Wordsworthian romanticism. *Land* is full of such images: rugged and desolate areas which bring to us evidence of another land and another time. To read them from our predominantly urban perspectives is to return to a strange, almost forgotten, Britain.

Much of the strength of a great deal of post-war British landscape photography lies precisely in the way it seeks a path between the two poles of its traditional reference: a settled English lowland and its highland alternative, the traditional difference between the Burkean sublime and the beautiful. But landscape remains very much part of a larger cultural construction, wedded to its particular status within the tradition. We can find examples of this approach in the work of Paul

33 Robert Adams

Los Angeles, Spring, 1984

A brooding image, almost the opposite of Fig. 29. Here telegraph poles have been replaced by pylons and the wires suggest the imposition of an advanced industrial economy over the surface of the land. A Californian Arcadia has given way to its urban present. This is Los Angeles the city, not Los Angeles the land of the angels. The title is basic to the photograph's meaning.

34 Fay Godwin

Reedy Loch above Strathan, Sutherland, 1984

Godwin's image offers a purist response to the Scottish scene, and bleaches it of historical and social clutter. The formal elements are uppermost. The use of light here is crucial, and informs the natural geometry the image seeks to celebrate.

Nash and Bill Brandt, but an image like John Davies's (1944–) *Agecroft Power Station, Pendlebury, Salford, Greater Manchester* (1983) [**35**] is exemplary. Whereas in a photograph like *Drurridge Bay No. 3 Northumberland* (1983) Davies seeks to photograph pure natural forces, in *Agecroft Power Station* those elements have been given over to a very different kind of power. Indeed, in part we could read this as an ironic riposte to Fenton's *Hurst Green*. This is a landscape made almost unreadable by the activity of industry and urbanization. It is exhausted. The power station dominates (and is suggestive of an earlier sublime vocabulary in terms of early responses to industrialization). The sky and land are denuded of any sense of life and energy. What grass there is is given over to a football pitch, the recreation ground of a nearby colliery serving the power station. To the left is an area of detritus where a horse coexists strangely with a car. Although the foreground

35 John Davies

Agecroft Power Station, Pendlebury, Salford, Greater Manchester, 1983

Davies's image pictures an almost derelict scene worn down by the detritus of industry and settlement. There are remnants of a 'natural' past, but such isolated details are subsumed into the scarred terrain. Likewise the sky is washed out. This image confirms Britain as an urban culture. Indeed, the looming presence of the power station achieves an iconic status equal to the monumental symbols (such as Stonehenge) of earlier periods.

exhibits the remnants of an earlier, and recognizable, rural imagery in terms of its trees, fences, gates, and streams, these are all but emptied of iconic significance—so many empty ciphers. The background is full of industrial images: a chimney, a pylon, and so on. The typically 'English' ambivalence between country and city is here given an underlying melancholic atmosphere. The English countryside, and with it the myth of Arcadia, has all but disappeared.

Davies's approach is similar to that of another central figure of landscape photography in the same period: Raymond Moore (1920–87). As he stated, he used landscape photography to seek out 'structures and images which allow me to comment on life in general'. Landscape photography abounds in cliché, and Moore, once a postcard photographer himself, is acutely aware of the terms by which we reduce scenes to their stereotypical obviousness. In contrast, his landscapes are subtle studies of meaning. Each is full of substance, without statement or definition. Able to move between the sublime and the banal, he makes of the most ordinary scene a wonderful play of the recognized and the mysterious. *Dumfriesshire* (1985) [**36**] is a mix of multiple signifiers, a mishmash of directions which lead us nowhere. The scene, although recognized, retains its own distance and otherness. To a culture based on seeing the land from and through the car, it is a major statement.

In recent years other British photographers have created a distinctive critique of landscape as a cultural construction, and in so doing

have established a body of photography which deconstructs the myth of England as it observes images of the contemporary scene. Martin Parr's (1952–) work, for example, is consistently ambivalent about, and critical of, England and Englishness. A landscape, for Parr, is as much a social map of attitude and life-style as it is a supposedly rural area. Parr's England is always part of a larger social reality, inhabited by a mass of figures who vie for the appropriate panorama and prospect in order to escape from the suburban and urban constrictions of their own lives. The country is reduced to its equivalent in an advertisement: a weekend jaunt in search, essentially, of the picturesque or a decent spot for a picnic. England, in Parr's images, is increasingly cluttered. Space is at a premium, and the country is no more than a tourist route. England's 'green and pleasant land' exists only in books and images. *Glastonbury Tor* (1976), for example, is a study of middle-class excursions intent on traditional prospects, and has about it much of Parr's characteristic humour. Although much of his work involves (like recent work by Anna Fox) the rural imagery of a new middle-class suburbia, other studies suggest a much more desperate and darker sense of contemporary England. His *New Brighton* series (1984) is a case in point [**37**]. The garish colours evoke a crude and cheap contemporary life-style, the very opposite of a pastoral past. The culture here is dominated by the spurious and the peripheral. Plastic and polystyrene, rather than the 'traditional' materials of wood and metal, abound. Everything reflects a transient, dislocated, and throw-away culture in an England supposedly based on its traditions and

36 Raymond Moore
Dumfriesshire, 1985
In its own way this suggests confusion and exhaustion. Natural images are as much hemmed in by manufactured signs as the land is controlled by human activity. The tree in the background has a fragile presence amidst the plethora of telegraph poles, signposts, and place-names.

37 Martin Parr

New Brighton, 1984

Martin Parr's brash colour studies deconstruct the terms of reference by which an idea of England is imagined. The garish reds and blues reflect a society based on the crude and the cheap; a miasma of rubbish amidst which the culture struggles to retain any sense of coherence or national identity.

underlying continuity. The figures in this image can barely see beyond their own immediate physical space. Parr images a culture without meaning or coherence, without a history or substance. England, as such, is now unreadable. Landscape, except as a memory, has all but disappeared.

In a more extreme form, the work of Chris Killip (1946–) offers a political perspective on an idea of landscape which he associates with a dominant conservative ideology.[5] *In Flagrante* (1988), for example, offers a radical image of the North-East of England dogged by unemployment and poverty. Landscape, such as it is, consists of urban squalor and emotional helplessness. The use of black and white, as against Parr's heightened colours, provokes the sense of a bleak and barren atmosphere.

Much of this new photography underlines the extent to which landscape is very much bound by an atmosphere of melancholy, just as in our own snapshots of scenes we invest them with a personal dimension which records a lost past. The moment, not so much the scene, is retained. And much landscape photography is bound by this search for an ideal representation. Whereas, when Talbot photographed a tree, it remained a tree, failing to expand into a larger sym-

bol of significance precisely because it had no context other than its literal presence, landscape photography, on the other hand, is framed within its own conventions and its own codes. It declares, in whatever terms, a pre-determined aesthetic and philosophy of the way we read the land and invest it with meaning. But the landscape photograph implies the act of looking as a privileged observer so that, in one sense, the photographer of landscapes is always the tourist, and invariably the outsider. Francis Frith's images of Egypt, for example, for all their concern with foreign lands, retain the perspective of an Englishman looking out over the land. Above all, landscape photography insists on the land as spectacle and involves an element of pleasure. The image is an analogue of those attributes we associate with a rural existence, so that to look at a landscape is often to enter precisely into an alternative world of possibilities. This is, perhaps, in a clichéd sense, why so much landscape photography finds its way on to calendars. And yet much landscape photography continues to suggest an emotional index which is crucial to its meaning. Gustave Le Gray (1820–82) produced wonderfully modulated scenes which suggest a visual equivalent to the music of Debussy, and in a contemporary context William Clift (1944–) has achieved an equal response, where the image effectively makes itself felt as a mood poem.

Harold Sund's *Yosemite Valley from Wawona Tunnel* (1971) recasts the language of landscape. A complex image with an exposure time of some ten minutes, this takes one of the primary American landscape areas, endlessly photographed, and places it in the context of the contemporary tourist. The grandeur that Watkins, for example, photographed has now been reduced to a day-trip in search of temporary sustenance. The perspectives have been reduced to little more than an extension of Disney and McDonalds. Like Tony Ray-Jones's *Glyndebourne* (1968), a satire on English social mores and the countryside, it is what the land now signifies in a cultural, not a 'natural', context which is crucial.