

S I X

Territorial Photography

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The establishment of a variety of photographic landscape practices in the period between the 1850s and the late 1870s occurred in parallel with the elaboration of a set of ideas about the character of photography itself. The initial critical response to photography, beginning with the announcement of its invention in 1839 and extending into the 1850s, was marked by a mind-numbing puzzlement about what photography was and how photographs stood in relation to the picture-making tradition. By the mid-1850s photographs came to be thought of as being different in kind from pictures made by all other means, owing almost exclusively to a fascination with the peculiar “mechanical” character of photographic genesis. This perceived difference had consequences—it was active in the shaping of photographic practice, which in turn provided further verification of the singularity, or otherness, of photography. The evolving belief that photographs were different from other types of pictures guided the technical changes in photographic practice that led, by the late 1850s, to the production of prints that could no longer be mistaken for pictures made in other media. Changes in the technical practice of photography resulted in photographic prints that looked machine-made because of their high finish and endless detail, and that consequently were thought to be precise, accurate, and faithful to the objects or scenes they represented.

It is obvious that the characterization of photographs as inherently mechanical and technological in origin helped give definition to the belief in the ultimately spiritual or imaginative springs of handmade pictures. It might seem at first glance that the motive for distancing established pictorial practice from the daily production of photographers by, say, critics and painters was their perception of a threat to their immediate economic interests, but photographers weren't competitive with artists or illustrators

in the established media. It is far more likely that the response to photography by professionals in the art world was a reflexive spasm aimed at industrialization in general and the growing urban middle class with its attendant and burgeoning popular culture.

The more intriguing question is why photographers themselves were so eager to accept the characterization of photography as mechanical, and why they worked to make photographic prints look less and less like handmade prints and increasingly like the highly finished products of machines. The answer here seems to be that the profession served a community that was itself primarily middle class and that allied itself with the culture of technological progress. Photographers embraced the otherness of photography because the consequent divorce of photographs from the culture of handmade pictures established a distinctive field of activity for them, a realm—better, a market—that could not be served by picture makers in other media. Theirs was the territory of the unimagined, the earthbound, and the factual. Over the span of a little more than a decade (beginning roughly in 1842), the photographic portrait evolved from being a picture in imitation of painted miniatures to a “likeness,” a recording of the integument of a sitter. On this view, photographic portraits were limited to the realm of the superficial and the apparent and could not pretend to be, for example, an evocation of the sitter’s character. A similar definition of audience belief and expectation accompanied the growth of photographic trade in travel, architectural and landscape production. These photographs too came to be thought of as integumental likenesses—as passive *recordings* of preexisting sights.

It is ironic, then, that a genre such as photographic landscape, which plays so prominent a role in recent histories of photographic practice, has been addressed almost exclusively in aesthetic terms—that is, in terms previously thought to be inapplicable to photographs.¹ The special oddity here is that little critical attention has been given to the variety of functions assigned to landscape work in the period between 1860 and 1880, the period in which many of the still-dominant approaches to scenic photography were invented and refined.

My aim in this essay is to probe the motivating factors behind two American western landscape practices of the 1860s and 1870s in order to come to some understanding of why these photographic landscapes look the way they do. I shall assume, unquestioningly, that the practices under investigation were successful in terms of satisfying the needs or interests of the specifiable audiences that they served. I do not propose, however, that their pictorial quality, assuming they possess such quality, is reducible in any straightforward or uncomplicated way to the satisfaction of the interests of any particular audience (including, say, the patrons who com-



6.1 R. Howlett, *In the Valley of the Mole*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1988.1033).

missioned them).² Most important, I want to emphasize the specificity of approaches to photographic landscape in the period between 1860 and 1880. By “specificity” here, I mean separateness and irreducibility. An understanding of the pictures I will discuss requires that we discriminate between their functions and attend to the grounds of these functions as well.

The first generation of landscape photographers—those who worked with paper negative systems from the early 1840s through the early 1850s—were almost completely dependent upon the pictorial conventions of the genre. These conventions were shared by picture makers who worked in the other print media—lithography, engraving, the various etching processes—as well as those who worked with paint on canvas. The tendency to fall back onto the inherited, customary, habitual conventions of subject matter selection and the manner of representation is especially apparent in the production of the early French and British photographers, who were for the most part educated by artists or were thoroughly familiar with a relatively broad and refined pictorial culture (see figs. 6.1, 6.2).



6.2 P. H. Delamotte, *Evening*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (52.524.7).

To a great extent, the work of the early landscape photographers was personal work, or work intended for a rather small audience of dedicated amateurs and educated professionals, and it was devoted to structuring landscapes in familiar terms. There was no market for these photographic pictures, no way of bringing them to the attention of a large audience, since there was as of yet no mass production techniques of photographic printing or inexpensive means of printing photographs in ink for use in books.

The creation of a large and definable market for landscape photographs began in the mid-to-late 1850s by means of the incorporation of localized photographic businesses, in the form of combined photographic and publishing houses, that were dedicated to the production and sale of travel, architectural, and landscape prints and stereographic views to incoming tourists. Prints were initially sold at or close to points of geologic or geographic interest, either one at a time or in multiples arranged in the form of photographic albums. These photographic publishing houses first appeared in Europe in the 1850s and in the western United States by the early 1860s. In the United States, these houses extended their reach by selling each others' work and by selling to print and stationery shops, so that by the early 1870s it was possible to visit, say, Denver and buy prints made in Yosemite Park by Carleton Watkins, landscapes made in Utah by Charles Savage, photographs of the land adjacent to the tracks of the Transcontinental Railroad by Andrew Joseph Russell, and so on. By the mid-1860s, two photographic supply houses (i.e., companies selling photographic equipment and supplies to photographers) in New York State began marketing landscape and stereographic views under license to local photographic publishing houses, through the mail, to a reasonably broad national audience. In a period of less than ten years, photographers thus managed to patch together a network of outlets for their own landscape work and came increasingly to guide their photographic production in terms of their most popular prints or in terms of the most popular prints sold by their competitors.

I am purposely framing the issue in commercial or business terms, concentrating on the relationship of the producer to the consumer, because it exposes, rather than hides, some of the motives guiding photographic production in this period. I could adopt a more academic vocabulary and speak in the terms of rhetorical analysis (i.e., of the relations between, artist, work of art, and audience), but I prefer, at least for the time being, to suppress these in order to focus in a more homely manner on the question of why these photographs were made at all and how they came to look the way they did. I am suggesting that they were produced to meet the demands of a growing middle-class audience, but saying this

does not begin to specify very much at all about why they came to look the way they did.

I began by noting that the first generation of photographers came from the privileged classes and were generally quite familiar with the tropes of landscape depiction. They were unable and probably unwilling to discard their inheritance of a naturalistic manner of depiction, one that emphasized suggestion, random variety of natural forms, and, in general, a devotion to the picturesque with all that notion entails. One of the things it does entail is the belief that a picture, at least a picture with aesthetic merit, implicates the maker of the picture, expresses his or her sensibility, represents something essential about how a scene was experienced. I bring this up here because this belief in naturalism ultimately undermined the practice of the first generation of landscape photographers. According to Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, a writer on art and photography in the 1850s, a picture has aesthetic merit only insofar as it is true to what she calls "our experience of nature."³ It follows on Eastlake's assumption that photographs, being the product of an inhuman mechanism, cannot be true to our experience of the world. If this is so, photographs making use of picturesque tropes will, as Eastlake insists, inevitably fail nonetheless to suggest our experience and will consequently fail to possess genuine aesthetic merit. This meant that photography could make no claims as a medium with an artistic potential.

Eastlake spoke on behalf of artists and critics of art, but in fact she was voicing as well the currently forming opinion of a far broader audience. The mid-1850s marked a turning point in the practice and definition of photography. Until this time, photographic societies had been dominated by aristocrats, gentlemen, educated and successful businessmen, artists, and photographers who had trained as artists (the first president of the Royal Photographic Society, elected in 1853, was Sir Charles Eastlake, the president of the Royal Academy of Art and also the husband of Lady Elizabeth Eastlake), who shunned commercial photographers. Increasingly, however, photographers came from less-educated ranks, and the new professionals transformed photography both technologically and in terms of the values they and their audience hoped and expected to find in photographs. One feature of the change in practice they brought about can be seen quite clearly in their preference for highly articulated, well-resolved pictures in which the suggestiveness and the relative absence of finish so much favored by devotees of the picturesque was replaced by an absolute precision of delineation through all represented planes. Additionally, the characteristic look and feel of photographic prints was completely changed; whereas photographic prints had previously been matte surfaced and were toned to various hues that conformed to those found in other

print media, by the late 1850s, they came to have a lustrous gloss, and their color was restricted to a rather distinct set of sepia hues. The ideal of photographic printing, which was first formulated in the mid-1850s but wasn't achieved for another few years, was a print with a highly glossed, glasslike surface that looked as if it had been machined on a production line. In other words, the ideal photographic print was supposed to look like a mass-produced item, like the infinitely replicable product of a technologically or industrially controlled mechanism.

By the mid-to-late 1850s, photography came to be separated in conceptual terms from the other depictive arts, and this separation was described increasingly not in terms of the differences between media but in ontological terms. Painting and the graphic arts were conceived as representing the realm of the imaginative, cognitive, and the ideal, while photography was, depending upon the interest of the writer, consigned or elevated to the realm of the factual, the material, the physically real. In his "Salon of 1859," Charles Baudelaire vented his spleen upon photography, noting that the photographic "industry," as he called it, had "ruined whatever might remain of the divine in the French mind." Baudelaire's attack on photography is really an attack on the emergence of the commodities of popular culture and the increasing importance of a growing taste for—in his words, the "purely material developments of culture." He then adds, "If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the multitude which is its natural ally." Conversely, the American essayist Oliver Wendell Holmes, writing four years later, noted, "It is well enough for some Baron Gros or Horace Vernet to please an imperial master with fanciful portraits of what they are supposed to be. But the honest sunshine [i.e., photographic mechanism] is nature's sternest painter, yet the best, for always true."⁴

This division in opinion about the relative value of photography as a medium for the production of artworks had a singular effect; arguing from opposed positions, Baudelaire the dandy and Holmes the Yankee inventor agreed on one major issue: photographs were in some respect transparent and true (at least to the material, superficial aspects of the visible), and their pictorial features were understood, accordingly, to have been derived not from conventions of illustration or from the photographer's unfettered imagination but from physical facts about the world as it appeared before the camera at the time of exposure. By the mid-1860s, photography had entered into popular culture, characterized as a utilitarian medium, primarily useful for purposes of documentation because of its contingency upon nature and natural processes.

As photography came to be distanced from the fine arts, the goals of

photographic depiction shifted away from the aesthetics of suggestion and moved toward articulation, high finish, and the precise rendering of detail. The new generation of photographers came to the practice of landscape photography aware of what landscapes in other media looked like (they had, after all, some general familiarity with landscapes through illustrated journals, travel books, and the kinds of paintings that were routinely displayed in hotels and public buildings), but without, they believed, an ingrained commitment to these forms. Freed from the obligation to make works of art, or pictures that would be compared to such works, they were, *they said*, free to record what they saw, unconstrained by convention. Thus, the myth of photographic contingency led to the creation of pictures that were thought to be free of all convention, perhaps wanting when judged against the standard provided by painting, but always honest, truthful, and, above all, disinterested. Accordingly, photographer's practice was understood to be discontinuous with the practice of all other picture makers; its standards were accuracy to nature and "lifelikeness"; to the extent that a viewer was moved to address a photograph in aesthetic terms, these were understood to have been derived from the physical qualities of the scene and the technical genius of the photographer (i.e., the ability to employ flawlessly the chemistry and physics of the process).

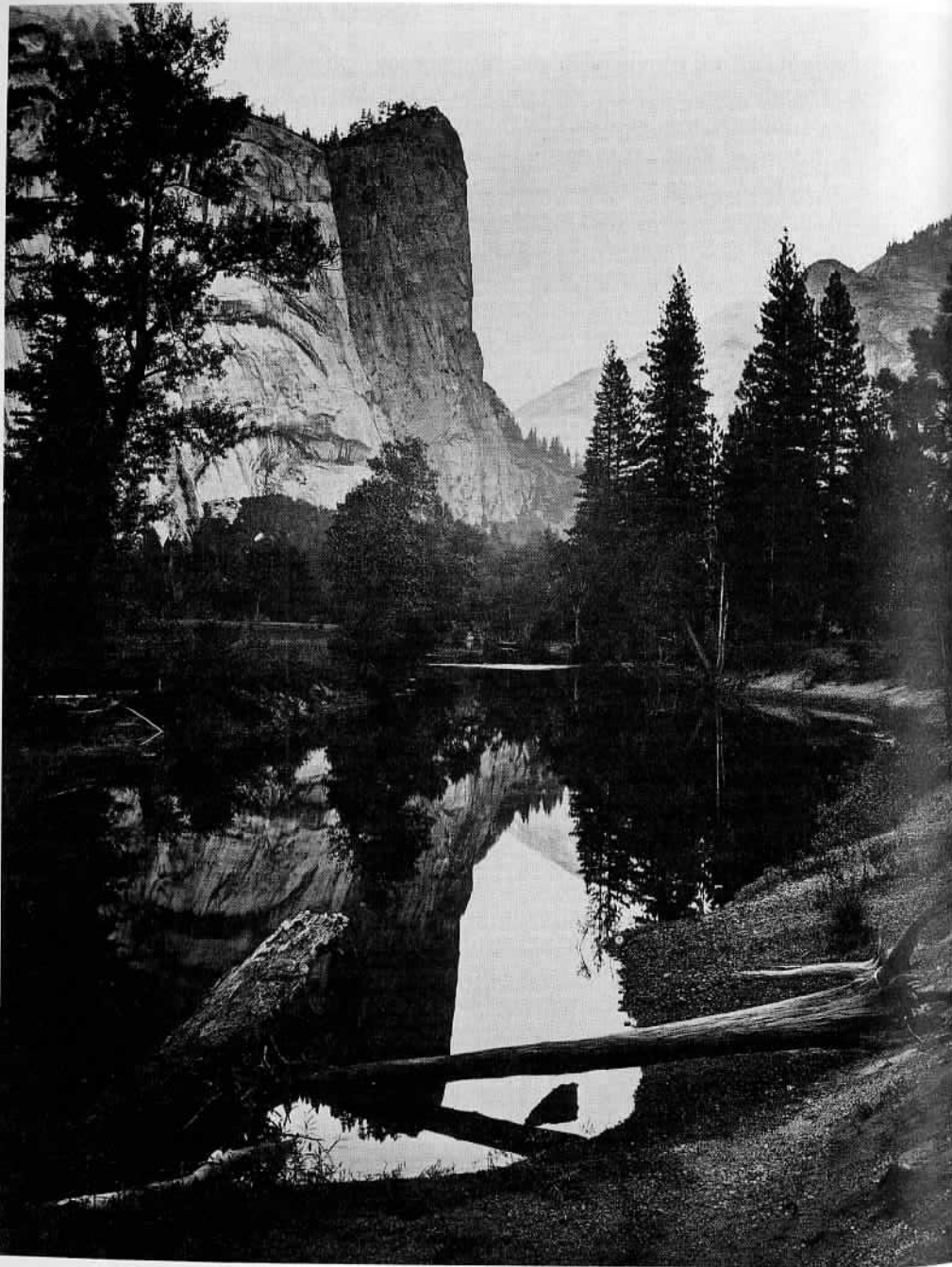
In practical terms, then, photographers were caught in a double bind: they had to devise an approach to the production of landscape pictures that *appeared* to escape the generally sanctioned motifs and formulae of landscape depiction, while emphasizing, at the same time, those qualities that were increasingly taken by their audience to be indices of photography—qualities that convey aspects of singularity, factuality, and materiality. By the early 1860s, the rhetorical question facing any would-be landscape photographer was a rather difficult one: how to make a picture that was resolutely photographic yet, at the same time, beautiful or stunning or, for want of a stronger word, attractive—but that nevertheless could be convincingly experienced as unconventional, a product of scientific laws and photographic craft.

The San Francisco photographer Carleton Watkins established an answer to the problem by merging a remarkable and heretofore unmatched technical virtuosity with formulas derived from, but not coextensive with, the picturesque and sublime modes of landscape depiction. This blend came to typify his work by the mid-1860s. Watkins produced flawless and mammoth 20-by-24-inch negatives, from which he printed highly finished, unrelentingly detailed views of Yosemite Park, the Pacific Coast, and the sparsely settled areas of Utah and Nevada. His first great success, the 1861 views of Yosemite, earned him an international reputation and

set the standard for commercial landscape photographers of the American West. His photographs were well known through the turn of the century, and his approach was emulated by nearly every important photographer of the American West up to and including Ansel Adams.

It is difficult to speak clearly about pictorial issues in this formative period of American landscape photography because they were initially set out in an oddly contorted—one could even say, incoherent—manner. Watkins's photographs from the 1860s can be addressed today in the ancient and opposed terms of art-historical analysis (i.e., in the vocabulary of origins and influence), but neither Watkins nor his audience were prepared to think of them in this way. In 1863 Oliver Wendell Holmes reviewed Watkins's Yosemite photographs (see fig. 6.3) and noted, "The three conical hill tops of Yosemite taken, not as they soar into the atmosphere, but as they are reflected in the calm waters below—these and others are shown, clear, yet soft, vigorous in the foreground, and marvelously delicate and barely distinct in the distance—appearing on the print *just as they looked in the mirror surface of the water* . . . a perfection of photographic art rivaling that of the best European technicians."⁵ The photographer's achievement here has twin aspects: it is, at the level of craft, a mechanical or technical one; but Holmes also insists that the standard of perfection involves reference to what *we* (and presumably, he means what anyone) would inevitably have seen while standing near the camera. Accordingly, the implication is that the picture is a recorded *sight*, something that would have been available to anyone who came upon this spot.

The assumption is that photographs stand in a special relation to vision, but vision detached from any particular viewer. It is a distributed vision, one that transcends individual subjectivity and, accordingly, individual interest. These photographs are to be understood as disinterested reports. Thus the photographer's achievement does not involve the sensitivity of an artist's eye or the use of an artist's imagination or the intelligent choice of the right depictive conventions; rather, it rests on the technical capacity to record a sight that is understood to be a natural image of nature. Watkins's fascination with the mirrored surface of Lake Tenaya is emblematic of his rhetorical posture as a photographer. He views his job as the fixing or recording of an evanescent reflection of physical reality and not as the construction of an idealized landscape. The standard against which his photograph is judged, according to Holmes, is its likeness to yet another likeness that nature provides of itself—the reflection in a natural mirror—the glasslike surface of Lake Tenaya. Neither Watkins nor his audience could see that the manner in which he organized his pictures



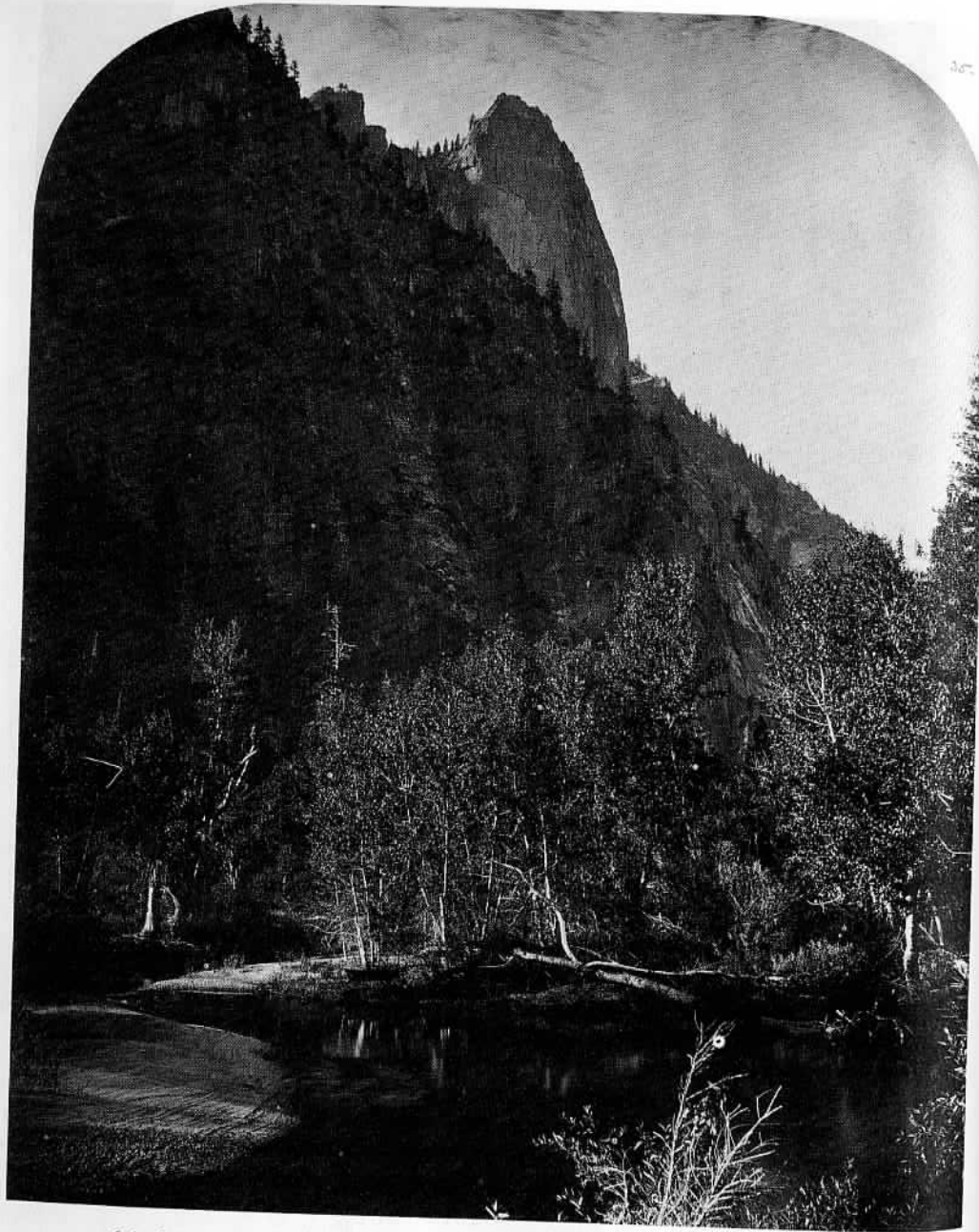
6.3 Carleton Watkins, *Washington Column, 2052 ft., Yosemite* (ca. 1861).
Courtesy Jeffrey Fraenkel Gallery.

and his concern, say, for soft and vigorous foregrounds combined with marvelously delicate and barely distinct backgrounds were adaptations of existing landscape practice in other media.

The irony is that with photography playing the role of mechanical and nonartistic outsider to established and evolving landscape practices that seem internal to painting, painters of western America such as Albert Bierstadt, William Keith, and Thomas Moran could point to Watkins's photographs for scientific corroboration of the way in which they constructed their painted landscapes of the West. And so, a way of painting landscapes and viewing them became (for a photographer with Watkins's interests) *the* way of looking at nature, which in turn guided photographers in making purportedly honest, scientifically sanctioned pictures of nature that somehow were supposed to escape artifice, personal interest, and subjective response.

This view of photography grants Watkins's photographic enterprise immense power, for it allows the photographer to make pictures that seem not only to have escaped his response to the world but to have escaped the constraints operating on all picture makers in all other media. My claim here is that the emerging rhetoric of photography in the 1860s suppressed—perhaps overwhelmed would be a better word—any viewer's ability to understand Watkins's photographic landscapes as being landscape pictures at all. These photographs did not escape landscape conventions; they adopted and reformulated them. This is clear not only from comparing photographs like those made by Watkins to drawings, prints, and paintings by Keith and Bierstadt but from the critical literature of the period, which continually commends photographers for having achieved pictures faithful to nature that *coincidentally* share specific compositional and pictorial features with landscapes wrought in other media. In other words, such criticism congratulated photographers not for their use of landscape conventions but for their coincidental scientific or mechanical corroboration of them.

By the time Watkins made his first views of Yosemite in 1861, eastern American and European travelers had already written about its "picturesque pleasures" and its combination of gardenlike grace with breathtaking grandeur. Watkins's photographs address these expectations by formulating the valley in terms that are familiar and that emphasize its accessibility and, at the same time, its grandeur (see fig. 6.4). The great success of his first Yosemite series encouraged him to adapt this way of making photographs to other places in the West. His views of the Pacific Coast from California to Oregon often cast it as an unspoiled and unspoilable Garden of Eden—as places to visit, but also to live in. In other



6.4 Carleton Watkins, *Sentinel (View Down the Valley)*, 3270 ft., Yosemite (1861).
Courtesy Jeffrey Fraenkel Gallery.

words, Watkins's landscapes address the Pacific Coast as potential real estate and as a site for eastern investment and development.

In addition to publishing his own views of the natural grandeur of the West, Watkins also worked on commission for the California State Geological Survey, for mining and lumber interests, and, by the end of the 1860s, for the Pacific railroads. If the depictive agency, photography, was itself an insignia of industrial and technological progress, so too was the content of his commissioned pictures. Watkins's mining and railroad photographs—especially the latter—attempt to portray a visual harmony between the land and the new tokens of progress symbolized by the industrialization of the land itself. The mining photographs often emphasize a kind of orderliness in the face of what we would now see as the brutalization of the environment, or concentrate on the juncture between the natural and the man-made that derives its interest from the contrast of natural variety and wildness to the geometric regularity of industrial forms. Where the scene before him contained few of the raw materials needed to make a picturesque or beckoning view, Watkins generally managed to aestheticize and overwhelm the apparently ugly or nonnatural by playing man-made designs against a ruined natural environment and then reducing the highlights and shadows to a smooth continuum of rich middle tones that, in a manner of speaking, become the subject of the picture. If this is too modernist a description, then we can say, at the very least, that these tonalities become a major source of pleasure in looking at the photograph. The smoothness and seamlessness of tonal gradation in the photograph of the Malakoff Diggins, together with the remarkable resolution of detail, is intended to please the eye in a way that the scene itself never could (see fig. 6.5). Some recent critics of such pictures see Watkins's delight in photographic tonalities as being at the core of his work. I'm not sure we need to make him into an early photographic modernist to appreciate his ability to find a source of an aesthetic response in the smooth rendering of middle tones irrespective of the character of the objects he photographed.

Watkins's photographs of the railroads, like the view of Cape Horn in Oregon, again seek quite successfully to harmonize the landscape with industrial progress in the form of the tracks of the new rail line (see fig. 6.6). The view is grand, sublime, quiet. The regular tracks drive the eye toward the background, where they disappear into the land, without a trace. There is an equilibrium suggested by this picture, a balance between the controlled regularity of the rails and the immensity of the land. Watkins found here an effective means of obliterating the division between what he called "natural wildness" and the hard-edged, linear forms of industrial technology. The appearance of the land is left undisturbed



6.5 Carleton Watkins, *Malakoff Diggins, North Bloomfield, Nevada County* (1871).

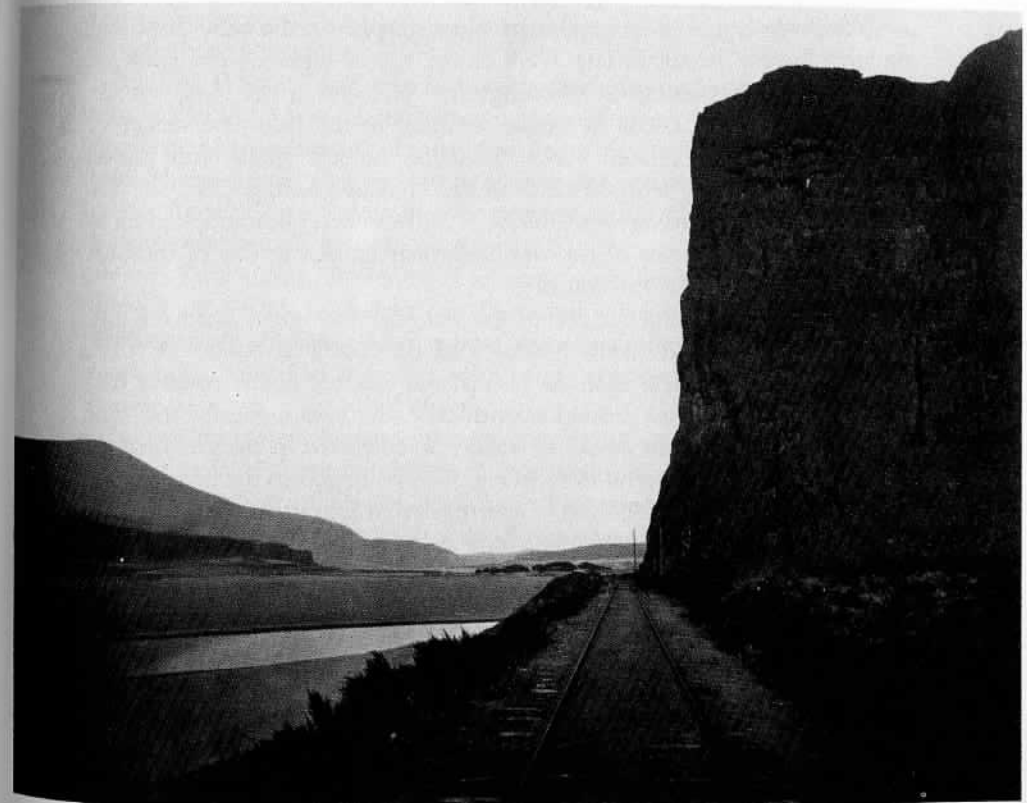
by the rails, unscarred, in its original condition. The predominant issue here seems to be one of showing the scene *just as it looked* by emphasizing pictorial coherence and integrity, but it masks the broader enterprise of harmonizing nature and industry.

I don't mean to suggest that Watkins was a self-conscious propagandist for mining or railroad interests, but only that the evolving character of photographic practice and reception allowed him to think of himself as an entrepreneur whose job was to record preexisting scenes in a thoroughly disinterested manner. Watkins's photographs are monumental, but they were not understood to be monumentalizing. He was a champion of development and, like most American businessmen of his time, was devoted to the idea of progress—understood in terms of ownership and industrial development of the land and its resources. His pictures neatly avoid questions about whose land it is that is being developed and judged by his photographs; he seems never to have wondered about the original inhabitants of California, Oregon, Utah, and Nevada, who lived on mean

reservations, removed from the land that had been theirs less than forty years before.

Watkins's photographs reinforce the commitment of his audience to a belief in a western American Eden, but it represents the Garden in a way that encourages the audience to see it as a scene of potential exploitation and development. This representative scheme, then, presents the possibility of a double salvation—a return to unspoiled innocence and an opportunity to profit from the violation of innocence. It offers, furthermore, a reassurance that this untouched West can withstand endless mass immigration and industrial exploitation.

Watkins's photographs earned honors at international expositions and praise from painters and eastern photographers because they are essentially invitational in character and because they address the expectations of an



6.6 Carleton Watkins, *Cape Horn near Celilo, Oregon* (1867). Courtesy Jeffrey Fraenkel Gallery.

audience that was exposed continually to stories and pictures romanticizing the frontier and inflating the promise of wealth and self-sufficiency that lay just beyond the frontier. But at precisely the same time another photographer, Timothy H. O'Sullivan, photographed parts of the American West in a manner that might best be termed "contrainvitational."

The block of years from 1867 through 1879 marks a transitional period in the exploration of the western United States—a transition from army surveys and management of the largely unknown and uninventoried interior (unknown, that is, to non-Native Americans) to civilian surveys managed by the rapidly expanding class of scientists and engineers. O'Sullivan served as the photographer for two major western expeditions: Clarence King's Geological Explorations of the Fortieth Parallel (1867–70 and 1872), and the Geographical and Geological Explorations West of the One Hundredth Meridian (1871 and 1873–74), under the direction of George Montague Wheeler.

O'Sullivan began as an apprentice photographer in the New York studio of Mathew Brady in late 1858 at the age of eighteen. In 1860 he moved to Brady's studio in Washington, D.C., and at the outset of the Civil War in April 1861, he began working in the field as a maker of battlefield and war-related views. In 1863 he left Brady and joined Alexander Gardner, who worked as the civilian photographer for the Army of the Potomac. By April 1865, O'Sullivan had photographed most of the major battlefields of the war and was regarded as one of the best field photographers in the country.

In the year following the end of the war, the geologist Clarence King, a twenty-five-year-old recent graduate of the Sheffield School at Yale, argued before Congress that the unexplored interior of the country had to be mapped and inventoried scientifically and systematically and that expeditions to the West could no longer be entrusted to the direction of a scientifically untrained military. King, who belonged to the first generation of scientists to be educated entirely at American institutions, was convinced that the kind of education available at West Point made it unlikely that the military could effectively undertake a genuinely scientific survey. Until 1866, all western expeditions sponsored by the federal government had been run by the military and were organized primarily to map what were known as "hostile lands" and to establish forts and supply bases for the protection of incoming white settlers and prospectors.

King argued that it was time for America to demonstrate its native scientific "genius" by sponsoring studies on a par with the best geologic and geographic work produced in Germany, France, and Great Britain. In part, he owed his success in convincing Congress to place him, late in 1866, in charge of the Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel to

his combination of a competitive, nationalistic bravado and his exotic scientific education, which he used effectively to persuade his congressional questioners. King presented himself as scientifically disinterested, driven by a desire first to understand the vast contents of America and then to put whatever knowledge he gained into the hands of those who could best use it—scientists, land management experts, and mining company engineers. King brought O'Sullivan to the West as his expeditionary photographer when fieldwork began in the summer of 1867.

Working almost continually from the spring of 1867 through the end of the field season of 1874, O'Sullivan produced a large group of photographs, taken primarily in the Great Basin areas of Nevada, Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. His photographs are singular when compared with the work of other western photographers of the period. They repeatedly deny what Watkins's photographs characteristically confirm, namely, the possibility of comfortable habitation, of an agreeable relation of humans to the natural landscape. They portray a bleak, inhospitable land, a godforsaken, anesthetizing landscape.

Unlike Watkins and the businessmen-photographers who followed him, O'Sullivan was unconcerned with selling his prints or with addressing the expectations of a large audience. Some historians of photography have argued that his major assignment was to provide incentives, in the form of pictorial plums, that would satisfy Congress and provide it with the motive to vote ongoing funds for the two expeditions he served. This notion, however, is in error, since both King and Wheeler were funded from the outset for the duration of their work in the field. Moreover, the librarian of Congress spent years requesting photographs from both King and Wheeler, with only occasional responses from the survey directors.

Given their jarring pictorial character, O'Sullivan's photographs have proved to be difficult to place within a historical context. Since the late 1930s, historians of photography have addressed them as precursors of modernist photographic practice and have removed them from the context of their production, ascribing their pictorial density and complexity to O'Sullivan's precociously modern "photographic vision." Rosalind Krauss has responded to this claim by countering that O'Sullivan's work was essentially scientific, that he was a maker of scientific "views" and not of landscapes (as if this were an immediately perspicuous distinction).⁶ Krauss is primarily interested in showing that O'Sullivan's photographs cannot be legitimately incorporated into a contemporary museum context and cannot legitimately be compared to the work of painters who were O'Sullivan's contemporaries. She claims that the "discursive space" of an expeditionary photographer was not the same as the "discursive space" of

a Parisian painter. If the claim here is that O'Sullivan did not conceive of his work in the way that Courbet or Monet conceived of theirs, she is surely correct.⁷ But the claim is broader than this, since Krauss maintains that the *scientific* nature of O'Sullivan's photographs somehow precludes an investigation of their pictorial character.

The problem with a view like Krauss's is that it assumes what needs to be proved. It assumes that O'Sullivan went to the West as a scientist, or at least that his enterprise was scientific in character. But both of his chiefs argued forcefully that photography was incapable of producing pictures useful for the purposes of measurement and quantification and that, accordingly, each needed a band of topographical draftsmen, since O'Sullivan could not provide scientifically accurate pictures.⁸

Dismissing Krauss's major assumption is not without an unhappy consequence, however, since it leaves us without an explanation of what O'Sullivan was doing in the West. If he was not making purely documentary, or scientific photographs, or if he wasn't functioning as a publicist for his expeditions, what was he doing? The short answer to the question is that he was making illustrations for the interim and final reports published by the surveys. The longer answer is that he was making pictures for the only audience from which he ever received guidance or advice—the two chiefs of his surveys; of the two, it was Clarence King who had the most impact upon O'Sullivan. O'Sullivan's job was to provide "generally descriptive" photographs of the places he visited, which functioned, in King's words, to "give a sense of the area," but which were not used as evidence for the findings of the various authors of the reports.

Both the King and Wheeler surveys used photographs as the basis for lithographs that were bound into their interim and final reports. Each of the surveys also produced bound volumes of original photographic prints as well as sets of stereographic views that were sent to selected government agencies, universities, and foreign governments. Very few of O'Sullivan's photographs reached an audience of nonprofessionals, except for those that went to Congress and the army.

After the publication of the expeditionary final reports, which were completed in 1879, O'Sullivan's name and photographs dropped from sight until 1939, when a handful of them were discovered by Ansel Adams, who sent them to Beaumont Newhall, then acting curator of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Adams, the master technician, described the pictures as "technically deficient, even by the standards of the time, but nonetheless, surrealistic and disturbing."⁹ Newhall saw the photographs as prototypical modernist photographic landscapes and published some of them in his histories.



6.7 Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *Sand Dunes near Carson City, Nevada Territory* (1867).
Courtesy National Archives and Records Service.

Thus, they entered into the modernist history of photography and have remained there ever since.

It is easy to see why Newhall popularized some of O'Sullivan's photographs. Thanks to Newhall, *Sand Dunes near Carson City, 1867*, one of the first made by O'Sullivan as he entered the Great Basin in the first days of his first season in the West, is one of two most well-known prints by O'Sullivan (see fig. 6.7). The wagon is O'Sullivan's portable darkroom, and it is shown in the midst of a boundless desert. The footprints leading to the foreground are O'Sullivan's own, made as he set up the camera and raced from the wagon with the plate he sensitized in it. It is easy to see why a modernist would find this picture appealing—it seems to be centered on the conditions of photography and the craft of a photographer. The footprints in the sand might even suggest the impressions left on the plate by the light exposing it. The photograph heroizes the photog-

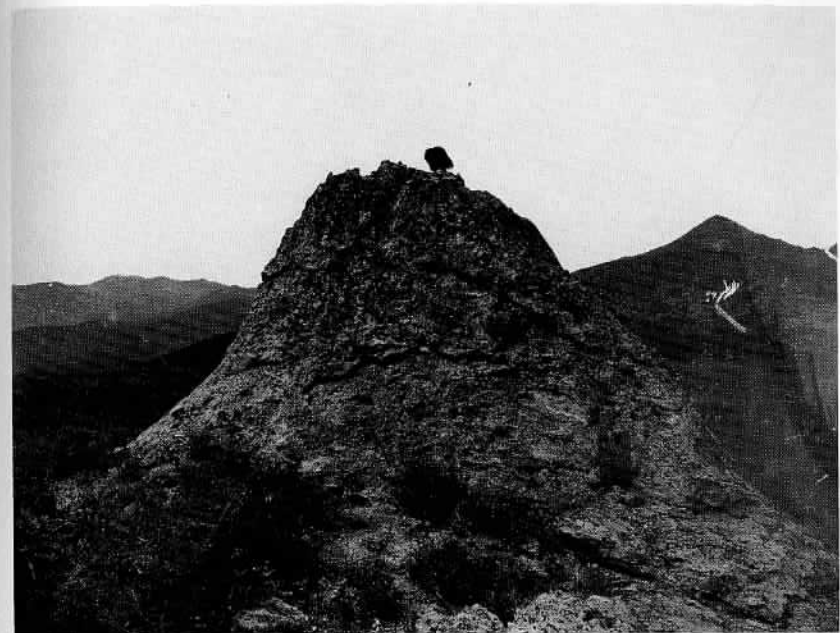
rapher, and it heroizes his work; one man in the great vastness of the Great Basin, working alone in solitude. But it is about something else as well. It is about this place and its incapacity to support life, about its inhospitability. The land supports little in the way of growth; the tracks left by the wagon wheels are evanescent.

It is important to know, however, that this picture is misleading. It was made in the midst of a great flat, red-earth plateau in which dunes like this occasionally dot the plain. O'Sullivan dragged the wagon, with great effort and the help of a member of the expedition, onto the dunes and then moved his camera in close so that the edges of the picture cropped off the barren flatness of the plains. As a bit of scientific information (understood as a "representative sample" of the region), its suggestion of a boundless desert is entirely inaccurate.

O'Sullivan's photographs are often populated, but he denies human figures their function in picturesque landscapes—they do not mediate between the viewer and the depicted scene; they are not guides placed in



6.8 Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *Fissure Vent of Steamboat Springs, Nevada* (1867).
Courtesy National Archives and Records Service.



6.9 Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *Hot Springs Cone, Provo Valley, Utah* (1869).
Courtesy National Archives and Records Service.

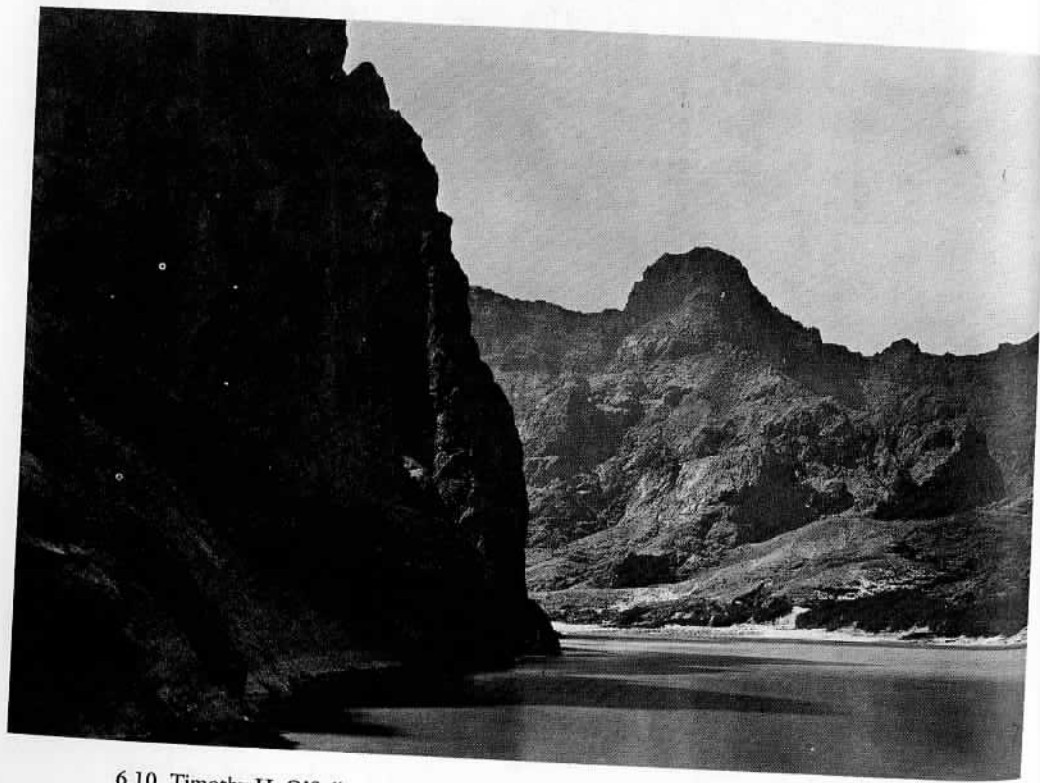
the foreground or midground who can help the viewer construct an imaginary experience of the land. Figures function most often as indices of a precarious and frightful relationship between explorer and the object of exploration. In one, a sheet of sulfurous steam floats across the figure of an observer and nearly obliterates it, leaving only the ghostlike adumbration of a human being (see fig. 6.8). The photograph suggests the impossibility of maintaining all but the most fundamental conditions of personhood in this place, which does not merely lack the capacity to support human habitation but actively obliterates human presence.

The grotesque, disembodied human head that seems to sit atop a tufa cone is similarly grotesque and contrainvitational (see fig. 6.9). The "scientific" point of the picture is clear; the cone is hollow, which O'Sullivan sought to show by having an assistant stand inside it. Whatever the intention, however, the effect of the conjunction of a human head at the apex of the hollow mound is chilling, discomforting, weird. Part of the figure has disappeared into the earth; it seems to have been swallowed whole by nature and is incapable of resisting.

O'Sullivan repeatedly placed figures in the far midground or background, dwarfed by immense vistas or geologic forms that obliterate indi-

viduality (see figs. 6.10 and 6.11). Rather than functioning as yardsticks for the conveying of information about size relationships in the depicted field, these figures serve to underscore the unhappiness of the relation between human beings and the vast and barren landscape. They are counterparts to the small and featureless figures that dotted the tower in eighteenth-century prints of the Tower of Babel.

By contrast with Watkins's photographs, O'Sullivan's representation of the West is an awed stare into a landscape that is unmarked, unmeasured, and wild, a place in which man is not yet—and not without an immense future effort—the measure of all things. This interior is presented as a boundless place of isolation, of contrasts of blinding light and deep, impenetrable shadows. It is astonishing, often alienating, at times gruesome. The pictures seem to offer a glimpse of nature prior to naturalization (or perhaps of a denatured nature), something like a “freak” show of unnatural forms that are at the same time entirely natural—to be addressed as



6.10 Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *Black Canyon, Looking Below Near Camp 8, Colorado River, Arizona* (1871). The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1986.1054.20).



6.11 Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *Ogden, Utah* (1874). Courtesy the National Archives and Records Service.

geologic monstrosities and grotesqueries. O'Sullivan's photographs stand to Watkins's landscapes in much the same way Mathew Brady's cabinet photographs of Barnum's freaks stood to a well-crafted celebrity portrait of the time. Like Brady's photographs of the three-legged man or the bearded woman, O'Sullivan's photographs are both fascinating and mysterious. They work against popular conceptions of nature and the natural by defamiliarizing nature, by refusing to formulate the land of the Great Basin in the accessible and reassuring terms of the picturesque.

O'Sullivan's photographs are antipicturesque in most of their details. They often achieve a sublime, breathtaking character and doubtless can be analyzed formally, in terms of some of the tropes of the sublime. My interest here is not to provide such a formal analysis but to suggest how photographs that refuse so steadfastly to bow to the organizational principles of contemporary landscape photography, or to exemplify the values

found in the work of many other western photographers of this time and of these places, in fact served the interests of the expeditionary leaders.

The photographs of Watkins and William Henry Jackson, the other well-known photographer of the American picturesque-sublime, were calculated to play to the expectations of their audience, to reassure and reconfirm beliefs about the American landscape and to portray it as a scene of potential habitation, acculturation, and exploitation. The land was portrayed as God's country and, coincidentally, that of the railroads, real estate, and mining interests as well. It was a land of the main chance and the second chance. It was not without cause that William Henry Jackson's single most famous and popular photograph was of the Mountain of the Holy Cross in the Colorado Rockies—a mountain towering above all that stood near it and bearing the distinct impression of an enormous, eternally snow-covered cross.

O'Sullivan's photographs deny all this view of the land, but to what end? They were made for the first modern surveys of the American interior—the first surveys managed and directed by civilians working for the government. Unlike the commercially produced work of well-known western photographers, they present the interior not in the terms of the expected or the anticipated, the known or the acknowledged, but as *terra incognita*, as a world different from ours, unfamiliar, inhospitable, and terrifying.

In describing his first descent into the Great Basin in 1866, Clarence King wrote:

Spread out before us lay the desert, stark and glaring, its rigid hill chains lying in disordered groupings, in attributes of the dead. The bare hills are cut out with sharp gorges, and over their stone skeletons, scanty earth clings in folds, like shrunken flesh: they are the emaciated corpses of once noble ranges now lifeless, outstretched as in a long sleep. Ghastly colors define them from the ashen plain in which their feet are buried. Far in the south were a procession of whirlwind columns slowly moving across the desert in spectral dimness. A white light beat down, dispelling the last trace of shadow, and above hung the burnished shield of hard, pitiless sky.¹⁰

King describes the basin as if it were a deserted battlefield, a place of destruction and death. Two years later, after riding three days with O'Sullivan to explore the Great Falls of the Snake River in Idaho, the so-called Shoshone Falls, he contrasted Yosemite with the falls:

The Yosemite is a grace. It is an adornment. It is like a ray of light on the solid front of the precipice. We come to the valley expecting it and somehow already knowing it. But no sheltering pine or delicately softened mountain distance of uppled Sierras announce the approach of Shoshone. You ride upon a waste—the

pale earth stretched in desolation. Suddenly you stand on a chaotic brink. As if the earth has yawned, black walls flank the abyss. Deep in the bed a great river fights its way through the labyrinth of blackened ruins and plunges in foaming whiteness over a cliff of lava. You turn from the brink as from a frightful glimpse of the unknown Inferno, and when you have gone a mile the earth seems to have closed again. Every trace of the cañon has vanished and the stillness of the desert reigns.¹¹

The contrasts here are telling. Yosemite is a grace, expected and somehow already *known*, while Shoshone is unexpected, frightening, and unknown. Yosemite is described in terms of sheltering pines and delicately softened distant mountains—words straight out of a manual of the picturesque, while Shoshone is the frightful chaos of the unknown.

Clarence King's dedication to professionalism, to a new attitude toward the scientific study and management of the land, provides a very good ground for representing the western American interior in terms of the unknown and the frightening. The difference between the photographs of Watkins and Jackson and those of O'Sullivan is the difference between the familiar, known, and understood and the alien, unknown, and unintelligible.

What O'Sullivan's photographs do is to mark off the Great Basin as unaddressable in terms of the evolving practices of photographic landscape—as a place that is not yet known. In so doing, they begin to outline a field of potential scientific inquiry. They underscore the difference between the developed and developing property of the Far West and the exotic and obscure land of the basin.

This land, which King believed was the last place on earth upon which God had stood, is properly the jurisdiction of experts—scientists, engineers, perhaps even theologians—people with special skills for the acquisition of special knowledge. It is, at least until it is explored, mapped, inventoried, and comprehended, the province of King and his young, knowledge-hungry, acquisitive, and aggressive scientific-professional class. If I am correct in this assessment, then O'Sullivan's photographs work not so much to delineate a territory of potential American states as they do to define a very different kind of territory—one that we would now call a field, a discipline—that could properly be investigated only by the new elite, to the exclusion of the old military caretakers. This field of investigation may be hostile, but King believed that the army could only hold it, never coming to know, understand, and manage it. That was work for a new class of professionals. O'Sullivan's illustrations provide visual, photographic proof of the unknown character of the land and imply the need to gain power over it by coming to know it. The job is to probe the territory, subject it to scientific examination, thus under-

standing what it can tell us about its past and how it can be used in the future.

Representing the Great Basin in Watkins's terms would have suggested a prior understanding of the land, but as I see it, O'Sullivan's role was to furnish pictures of an area that resisted understanding in familiar terms. O'Sullivan's photographs thus introduced their audience to a new domain—it is not a geographic region but the territory of modern science and its attendant professionals. These pictures are territorial, but they adumbrate a territory unapproachable in terms of representational schemes that are the common property of the propertied, or would-be landed, class. O'Sullivan's photographs function by refusing to formulate the land in the most readily available terms, by blocking habitual routes of imaginative access.

O'Sullivan's photographs, then, are not to be understood as scientific documents, but as something like pictorialized "No Trespassing" signs. They mark the beginning of an era—one in which we still live—in which expert skills provide the sole means of access to what was once held to be part of our common inheritance.

Notes

1. The idea that photographs are essentially records implies that aesthetic valuation can be applied to them only equivocally. To say a photograph is beautiful really means that it is a record of a beautiful scene—the beauty has been recorded, not made. Modernist historians of photography have shaped their histories by subscribing to a belief in a unique photographic aesthetic and have attempted to show that terms of aesthetic valuation can apply to a photograph in virtue of the inherent qualities of the picture and not of the scene.

2. Simply put, a photograph—say a picture made to sell real estate—isn't said to be beautiful because it works effectively as an aid to the realtor. It seems more congenial to common sense to suppose that its effectiveness is a consequence of its beauty. The question of how we account for its beauty isn't the same as how we account for its effectiveness.

3. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, "Photography," in *Classic Readings on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, 1980). Eastlake doesn't say who is covered by "our," but the tone of her essay makes it clear that it extends to educated gentlemen and women who have an appreciation of the fine arts.

4. Charles Baudelaire, "The Modern Public and Photography," in *Art in Paris 1845–1862* (London, 1967); Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Doings of the Sunbeam," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1863 (emphasis mine).

5. Holmes, "Doings of the Sunbeam."

6. Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces," in *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983).

7. If O'Sullivan should properly be thought of as an artist, I have no doubt

that it is for reasons very different from those we adduce for painters like Monet. This, incidentally, is not a major issue for me.

8. This is an important point but is outside the scope of this chapter. Popularly held beliefs about the mechanical and worldly origins of photographs were well established by 1867, but experts who sought quantifiable data from pictures were aware that photographs could not provide the kind of information they needed. Thus, there was a division between scientists and popular opinion about photography—laypeople holding that photographs were essentially factual and scientific, while scientists used handmade drawings for their work because photographs could not provide them with the facts they needed.

9. Unpublished letter from Ansel Adams to Beaumont Newhall (presently in Newhall's files).

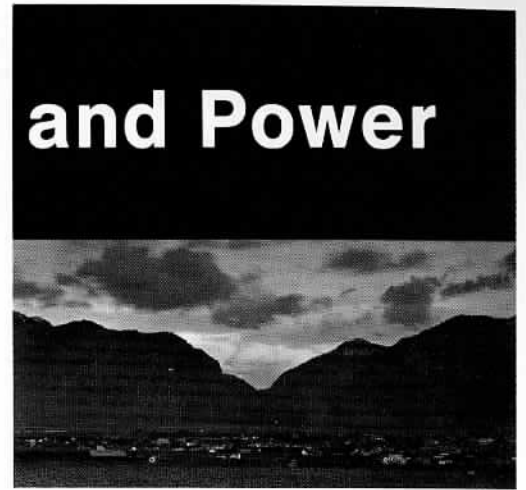
10. Clarence King, "The Range," *Atlantic Monthly* 28, no. 159 (May 1871).

11. Clarence King, "The Falls of the Shoshone," *Overland Monthly* 5, no. 4 (October 1870).

Landscape and Power

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