

Landscape Photography: A Social Construct?

An examination of the extent to which the rural landscape in American and British photography is socially constructed.

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Introduction

“Landscape is not a genre but a medium...[it is] a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package.”

(Mitchell, 1994: 5)

These propositions by Mitchell from *Landscape and Power* (1994) imply that *Landscape* is not just the rural countryside or the pictorial representation of it, but in fact a combination of the two. Additionally, David Bate notes that landscape imagery has long been used in societies to represent ideas of nature and the natural, rural myths and national and ethnic identity (Bate, 2000: 34), whilst Harvey claims that places are “social constructs” (Harvey 1993: 25) that are the result of spoken, written or pictorial language (Tuan 1991: 693). Andrews sums up these assertions by terming landscape as a socially constructed “cultural instrument” (Andrews, 1999: 15). Therefore this essay will investigate the extent to which the rural landscape photograph is socially constructed concept by focussing on the American and British experience. To examine this, two lines of enquiry will be followed. Firstly, in response to Clark’s claim that the rural landscape aesthetic was original born out of art and literature (Clarke, 1949: xvii), and given that art and literature pre-dated photography, it is logical to investigate the extent to which this development underpinned the development of the rural landscape in photography. Secondly, the cultural development of the rural landscape in photography and the influence of the painted image will be discussed. Throughout both sections I will present the socio-cultural context in which both photography and art flourished. Finally, to help assess the extent to which the rural landscape in photography is socially constructed, a number of landscape images will be deconstructed using Barret’s method of *photographic context* (Barret 2006), a method of analysis that allows for a more detailed analysis of the wider cultural context, rather than the semiology-based methods of Barthes (1973).

The Cultural Development of the Rural Landscape in Art

“People who have given the matter no thought are apt to assume that the appreciation of natural beauty and the painting of a landscape is a normal and enduring part of our spiritual identity.”

(Clark, 1949: xvii)

This quotation from Clark’s seminal work *Landscape Into Art* (1949) alludes to the close relationship between art and the concept of landscape, and that, culturally, there is more to landscape than our appreciation of beauty in nature. This section will discuss the development of the rural landscape aesthetic in European art and culture, notably the notions of the *picturesque*, *sublime* and the *rural idyll*, and in doing so will discuss some of the cultural, economic and social trends that influenced and sustained that development.

According to Andrews, *Landscape* is a Western European phenomenon derived from seventeenth-century Dutch painting (Andrews, 1989: 35). The actual word *landscape* entered the English language at the end of the sixteenth-century from either Germany (*landschaft*) or the Netherlands (*landschap*), where originally it was a classification of territory rather than an aesthetic concept, which in English became known as *landskip*. This functional attitude was expressed in painting, where the Dutch naturalist landscape aesthetic was very much about the pastoral use of the land, expressed through *real* symbols such as farmers and cattle drovers (Schama, 1995: 10) - S.V. Ruylsdall’s *Dune Landscape with Farmers* (1629), for example (figure 1). Although Berger claims these first “pure landscapes” initially answered no direct social need (Berger, 1972: 105), class was a determining factor in their production and consumption from the outset. Clarke asserts that this “landscape of fact” was a bourgeois art form that represented the “experiential world of the rising [Dutch] middle-class” (Clarke, 1949: 26).



Figure 1: S.V. Ruysdall, *Dune Landscape with Farmers*, 1629



Figure 2: Henry Peacham, *Rura Mihi et Silentium*, from *Minerva Britannia*, 1612

The English writer Henry Peacham (1576–1643) shows in his books *Graphice* (1612) and *Minerva Britannia* (1612) that this rural aesthetic was already established in England early in the seventeenth-century (figure 2). Not only did his books instruct the English Gentlemen class on how to compose a landscape painting, they made it clear that rural life was to be valued as a “...moral collective to the ills of the court and the city” (Schama, 1995: 11). This provides an early insight into the importance of the *experience* of the rural landscape in English culture, but also reinforces the class dimension.

A significant cultural factor in the development of aesthetic conventions for landscape art was the Grand Tour of Europe that flourished from the mid-seventeenth-century, where wealthy travellers and the European elite appropriated foreign, idealised landscape art (Andrews, 1999: 130; Bate, 2000: 34). In particular, the French artist Claude Lorrain (1600-82) and the Italian artist Salvatore Rosa (1615-73) were incredibly popular and collectable (figure 3 and 4). Thus, amongst the privileged classes, the *experience* of landscape was further reinforced and a particular landscape aesthetic further popularised and conventionalised. According to Callender and Wood, aesthetic theories that were a popular subject of eighteenth-century philosophy underpinned this travel and encouraged Grand Tour-ists to consider human relationships with the environment (Callender & Wood, 2004: 8). These theories around notions of beauty attempted to categorise landscape experience according to their effects upon the human mind and soul, of which the terms *picturesque* and *sublime* are key.



Figure 3: Claude Lorrain, *Landscape with Cephalus and Procris Reunited by Diana*, Late 1630s



Figure 4: Salvatore Rosa, *Rocky Landscape with a Huntsman and Warriors*, c.1670

Edmund Burke (1729-97) attempts to theorise the aesthetic and emotional effect of the sublime in his book *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), producing a work that had an important influence on aesthetics in Europe and America (Andrews, 1999: 132). According to Wells, the *sublime* is a term derived from the Latin word *sublimis* - meaning high, lofty, elevated, exalted – and is the quality of greatness or vast magnitude (Wells, 2004: 255). It is very much a subjective experience, but Burke describes the principle qualities of the sublime as obscurity, darkness, dimension, strong light and sombre colour, what Burke refers to as a “delightful horror” (Burke, 1756; cited in Andrews, 1999: 134). Andrews notes that the Italian artist Salvator Rosa was celebrated for pioneering this style (Andrews, 1999: 30) - the wild, turbulent and threatening landscape in *Rocky Landscape with a Huntsman and Warriors* (c.1670), for example (figure 4). Referencing the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Schama argues that our affinity to the sublime is based on the human desire to find in nature a consolation for our mortality and existence (Schama, 1995: 15). This theme was explored by the German landscape painter Casper David Friedrich (1774-1840), considered the most important and influential artist of the Romantic movement (Andrews, 1999: 143), whom was also known for painting allegorical landscapes employing the *Rückenfigur*, a contemplative figure silhouetted against the landscape (figure 5). This essay will show that this visual theme became a feature of some landscape photography, and may well have been influenced by Friedrich.



Figure 5: Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, 1818

Reverend William Gilpin (1724-1804) followed Burke by developing a fashion for the *picturesque*, a term of Italian origin meaning ‘the point of view essentially of a painter’, which existed alongside and was incorporated into the sublime:

“The picturesque is a form in which everything is supposed to be in its right place, organised, precisely composed and controlled... A good composition in relation to the pictorial form of the picturesque gives a certain type of satisfaction for the viewer which results in the spectator having an experience of the beautiful.”

(Bate, 2000: 36)

Gilpin’s popular *Essay on Prints* (1768) advocated various parts of the country as being picturesque, and in doing so established a fashion for the rural idyll and picturesque tourism. Artists used this as a guide to find these sites, and rendered these ‘pre-viewed’ sites into the appropriate visual style and coding (Bates, 2000: 3). Praz notes that alpine landscapes were particularly popular, hence the rush to the Lake District and North Wales in the 1760s (Praz, 1966: 39). Indeed, until the eighteenth-century the English Lake District was virtually unknown until it was popularised by English Romantic writers and painters, notably its native son Wordsworth, through which was developed a ‘place-myth’ (Shields, 1991; cited in Urry,

1995: 195), albeit a myth in those privileged sections of society that consumed and discussed such literature and were able to travel. Stylistically, the picturesque embraces both inhabited and uninhabited landscapes, embodied in Romantic art such Richard Wilson's *View on the Thames near Twickenham* (1762) or John Constable's *Flatford Mill* (1816) (figure 6 and 7). Andrews notes that Wilson's painting has clearly been influenced by Claude Lorrain, with its "...Claudean lighting and framing devices and the elegant pediment of Marble Hill House standing in for a Roman temple" (Andrews, 1989: 16). The search for the picturesque became so popular that a *Claude-glass*, a small portable mirror named after the French artist, was used to frame the landscape and was recommended to both artists and tourists of picturesque scenery. According to Schama (1995: 12), if the view in the mirror was judged to be close to the Claudian ideal, it was considered picturesque enough to be appreciated or drawn:

"Tourists carried Claude Glasses (focussing devices names after Claude Lorraine so they could frame, sketch and colour a view). By the early nineteenth-century, numerous 'picturesque tours' had been published, and the ways of looking at entire geographic regions had become conventional."

(Taylor, 1994: 17)

It is worth noting that America painters were directly influenced by the European taste for the Romantic, picturesque aesthetic, although a different geographical and cultural dynamic meant that nineteenth-century American landscape painting (and photography) had a different and overriding set of themes – i.e. the drama of nature, wealth of resources, man's heroics and the growth of settlement (Bezencenet, 2000: 57) (figure 8).



Figure 6: Richard Wilson, *View on the Thames near Twickenham*, 1762



Figure 7: John Constable, *Flatford Mill*, 1816



Figure 8: Frederic Edwin Church, *Niagara*, 1857

Rather than specifically because of the influence of Gilpin, Bermingham argues that the picturesque tradition in Europe was linked to “...actual loss and imaginative recovery” of society’s relationship to nature as industrialisation impacted on rural landscapes – for example, the loss of rural thoroughfares through enclosure acts causing the placing of emotional importance on remembered routes and locations (Bermingham, 1987: cited in Bezencenet, 2000: 58). As a result, pastoral traditions based on romanticised notions of the *rural idyll* were painted and heavily consumed. Indeed, Cosgrove and Daniels note that a search for English eighteenth-century paintings that depict newly enclosed fields or newly built farmsteads would be “fruitless”, with artists ignoring such evidence of agrarian change, and that land-owners who bought the art actually *preferred* idealised views (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988: 98). Wells notes that the trend for consuming the rural idyll was also a *therapeutic* antidote to economic progress and urban expansion:

“By the early nineteenth-century, *Landscape* stood as an antidote for the visual and social consequences of industrialisation, offering a view of nature as therapeutic, a pastoral release from commerce and industry.”

(Wells, 2004: 291)

This brief examination of the cultural development of the rural landscape through art has identified two main factors: firstly, socio-economic trends such as industrialisation, travel, the growing middle class and an inherent social need to establish symbols of nationhood and unity created demand for the picturesque and the pastoral traditions of the rural idyll; secondly, the pursuit of landscape was a cultural convention that was encouraged as an aesthetic experience. Therefore, it can be argued that landscape developed as a bourgeois concept, reinforced through class-based expectation and experience, and culturally expressed through the painted landscape image.

The Cultural Development of the Rural Landscape in Photography and the influence of the Painted Image

According to Clarke, landscape photography is encoded with the language and traditions of landscape art (Clarke, 1997: 55). Indeed, there has always existed a strong, symbiotic relationship between photography and art, with “...each form of those visual arts competing, imitating [and] adopting the strategies of the other” (Jussim & Lindquist-Cock, 1985: 1). This section will examine the relationship between art and the photographic representation of landscape, specifically by American and British photographers during photography’s formative years in the nineteenth-century, but continue to present the relevant cultural, social and economic context in which it flourished.

In terms of an overall visual style, Wells notes that photography adopted the compositional conventions of landscape painting, such as the landscape format, vanishing-point perspective and the rule of thirds (Wells, 2004: 291). In addition, the invention of photography from 1839 onwards coincided with realist movements in art. Using real people and places, realism resisted the metaphoric, allegorical portrayal of the landscape (Stremmel, 2006: 6). Therefore, photography was well suited to reinforcing this aesthetic, albeit with a sometimes idealised, romanticised view, as will be discussed.

In Britain, of paramount significance was society’s affinity to the picturesque and the rural idyll, a relationship that has been discussed as being culturally established through art and literature. Take, for example, this review of an English photography exhibition in 1852, illustrating that early in the development of photography a taste for this aesthetic was firmly established, and that conventions for observation and recording were in place from the outset:

“The English are, for the most part, representations of the peaceful village; the unassuming church, among its tombstones and trees; the gnarled oak, standing alone in the forest; the quiet stream with its water lilies and rustic bridge; the wild upland pass with its foreground of crumbling rock and purple; or the still lake, so still that you might drop a stone onto its surface before you can tell which is the real village on the margin and which the reflection.”

(Reviewer of 1852 English photography exhibition, cited in Seiberling, 1986: 46-47)

Bate notes that popular photographers such as Roger Fenton (1819-69) and Francis Frith (1822-98) sustained this aesthetic, treading the same picturesque routes in the 1850s as painters before them, producing images that helped map the routes of picturesque tourism for the masses (Bate, 2000: 35). In doing so, their images further reinforced notions of the picturesque and the rural idyll by presenting them to a wider audience, in which were coded the aforementioned visual traditions (figure 9). To quote the photographer H.P. Robinson, “...picturesqueness has never had so perfect an interpreter [as photography]” (cited in Talyor, 1994: 18). Clarke also makes reference to the class dynamic that exists in the images of photographers like Fenton and Frith, images that demonstrate idealised Victorian attitudes to landscape and rural England, rather than the social reality that existed:

“The photograph... established itself at a time when the landscape... 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 photograph... Landscape was viewed not so much in relation to its natural features as to the way it offered the image of a rural idyll quite at odds with reality. As a cultural index, the picturesque thus sought visual confirmation of a timeless arcadia, a unified image of social life.”

(Clarke, 1997: 55)

For example, Roger Fenton’s *Mill at Hurst Green* (1859) or H.P. Robinson’s *He Never Told His Love* (1884) are idealised, romantic views of a rural life, in which there is no evidence of work, poverty or hardship, and in which there is a perceived social unity (figure 10 and 11).



Figure 9: Roger Fenton, *Falls of the Llugwy (at Pont y Pair)*, 1857



Figure 10: Roger Fenton, *Mill at Hurst Green*, 1859



Figure 11: H.P. Robinson, *He Never Told His Love*, 1884

The point made by Clarke is an important one; rather than being purely *realistic* in the realism sense, and in addition to the purely aesthetic merits of the picturesque, such images reinforce the notion of the rural idyll for purposes of social unity and national identity, a concept that is bound up in what Anderson (1989) terms *imagined communities*, whereby the shared sense of nationhood you feel is reinforced through cultural symbols, in this case our affinity for the *Englishness* of the landscape. The Chinese Geographer Yi-Fu (1974) calls this relationship *Topophilia*, which is at its strongest when landscape is represented through the symbols of pastoral tradition, for example, or through specific environmental features such as *the quiet stream with its water lilies and rustic bridge*. Taylor, however, attributes this representation of an idealised rural arcadia to class-based motives, pointing towards the way that socially motivated *survey* photographers of late nineteenth-century recorded ways of life that were vanishing in the face of social progress, photographing subjects in their natural setting, and arguably exhibiting a downward gaze and objectifying their subjects:

“From their positions in the middle class, they regretted the disappearance of what they considered to be the unspoilt lifestyles of different and lower class people.”

(Taylor, 1994: 51)

P.H. Emerson’s photographs of rural labourers in the Norfolk Broads are a good example of this (figure 12), and will be discussed in more detail in the following section. These Victorian photographers, who were generally from the dominant classes and whose knowledge stemmed from their social and economic status, were selective about what they recorded, staying within a “...narrow range influenced by cultural convention” (Taylor, 1994: 18, citing Seiberling, 1986: 46).



Figure 12: P.H. Emerson, *Gathering Water Lillies*, 1886

The American experience of landscape photography was characterised by a different set of aesthetic and socio-economic motives, underpinned by the Westward expansion that was funded by the railroad companies and Government exploration (Warner Marien, 2002: 134). According to Bezencenet, a strong relationship between topographers, surveyors, painters and photographers existed on surveys, railroad expeditions and military campaigns. The camera was seen an instrument of precision and detail, whilst painting offered colour and atmosphere. They complimented each other and had the same aim – to present what was previously unseen (Bezencenet, 2000: 57). In terms of aesthetic style, early American photographers of the privileged classes were educated by artists, a group largely influenced by the European Romantic movement and entirely dependent upon pictorial conventions of the genre (Snyder, 1994: 176). Indeed, the photographer William Henry Jackson (1843-1942) was an accomplished painter before taking up photography - his painting *Muddy Pond* (1861) certainly conforms to the picturesque tradition of European art (figure 13). Thus, class and an aesthetic dependency on the painted image was as important a factor in America as it was in Britain. However, Bezencenet argues that American photographers attempted to create a new landscape form that escaped the visual language and values of the Europeans (Bezencenet, 2000: 56). Survey photographers involved in these expeditions to the western territories – such as Carleton Watkins (1829-1916) and Tim O’Sullivan (1840-1882) - encountered a vast open wilderness of virgin landscape in complete contrast to that of Britain, and imaged an



Figure 13: W. H. Jackson, *Muddy Pond, Vermont*, 1861

epic, *sublime* landscape that helped define nationhood and independence:

“The American wilderness provided an opportunity to create a landscape symbolic which met the cultural and ideological needs of a new nation, and one which aspired to escape what it perceived as the decadence of the Old World, of Europe... an idea as much as a type of terrain”

(Bezencenet, 2000: 56)

Watkins’s photograph *Yosemite Valley From the Best General View* (1865) typifies the desired aesthetic, showing the soaring sublime and expansiveness that he and his contemporaries tried to construct (figure 14). The scale and awe-inspiring view of the scene is emphasised by the lone figure standing by the tree, seen contemplating the landscape from behind, but it can also be argued that in such compositions there is a relationship to the Romantic art of Caspar David Friedrich. According to Warner Marien, there were actually two Wests in the American imagination: one of ancient American natives and vast, epic wilderness, the other of civilised progress and the exploitation of natural resources, such as minerals, arable land and timber, the other (Warner Marien, 2002: 134). The images of Carleton Watkins, used to entice foreign investment, negotiated this dichotomy. Warner Marien notes that Watkins attempted to show that man’s progress fitted in with nature, rather than disturbing it, and was one of the first American artists to construct a *commercial* sublime, “...rendering nature’s



Figure 14: Carleton Watkins, *From the "Best General View", Mariposa Trail, Yosemite Valley, 1865*



Figure 15: Carleton Watkins, *Cape Horn, near Celilo, Columbia River, Oregon, 1867*

grandeur with subtle, unobtrusive traces of new economic ventures” (Warner Marien, 2002: 136). In *Cape Horn* (1867) he seeks to harmonise the landscape with industrial progress, showing a balance between man and nature (figure 15); the untouched West is there for exploitation, but it can absorb that progress and remain unaffected (Snyder, 1994: 182). His landscapes, often devoid of humans, reassured the American public that the Wilderness was an “...eden of unsullied awe” (Warner Marien, 2002: 136). Indeed, Snyder notes that at times his printing style actively sought to cover up traces of humanity by rendering them with darker tones (Snyder, 1994: 183). Thus, wilderness was “...conceived as an American asset” (Bezencenet, 2000: 56), with its views becoming established standards against which future visual records of these “landscape-spectacles” would be measured (Bright, 1992: 128).

As a final point, the growth of middle-class tourism in both America and Britain and coinciding technological developments in the commercial publishing environment is a noteworthy factor in the representation and *consumption* of the landscape. Initially, there was no market for prints, and no way of reproducing them cheaply. From the mid-1850s, coinciding with the rise in travel, photographic publishing businesses flourished, providing a mass-market demand for portraits, landscape and travel photography (Snyder, 1994: 177). In the UK, Taylor notes that the mode of mass-market representation in books changed from engravings (of landscape paintings) to photographs (Taylor, 1994: 6). Thus, through landscape imagery, produced in large volumes both for the *demands of* and *in response to* a growing middle-class audience, conventionalised representations of idealised arcadia were reinforced.

This brief analysis of the development of landscape photography in its aesthetic and cultural context has in the first instance demonstrated a direct relationship with the painted image, particularly as a result of the insatiable appetite for the Romantic and picturesque aesthetic, which has been shown to have directly influenced both British and American photographers. However, the representation of landscape was not solely a response to aesthetic traditions for art's sake. Like art before it there are a number of cultural, economic and social factors that led to the production and consumption of the landscape aesthetic. Although a different approach existed in each country – British landscape imagery attempted to objectify rural environments and ring-fence the past, whereas American imagery was largely born out of progress and exploitation - photography was a cultural response to economic and social development, in which were presented reassuring landscapes and rural features that were symbolic of unified national identity.

Application and Translation of the Rural Landscape Aesthetic in American and British Photography

To help establish the degree to which landscape photographs are social constructs and to test some of the aforementioned points, three different photographs will be examined. The first two images are from the nineteenth-century and are by the Englishmen P.H. Emerson (1856-1936) and American Timothy O'Sullivan (1840-82), both of whom are considered *survey* photographers of their day, albeit with different subjects and social agendas. In the interest of balance, and to examine the extent to which aesthetic conventions in the representation of landscape persist, I will also analyse an image by the American Ansel Adams (1902-84), a celebrated photographer who lived, worked and died in the twentieth-century. To deconstruct these images the method of 'photographic context' offered by Terry Barrett (2006) has been selected, where meaning will be determined by analysing three types of context: *internal*, what is descriptively evident; *original*, background information such as the photographer's agenda or the historical, social, cultural or political context; *external*, the situation(s) in which a photograph is presented or found.

The image by P.H. Emerson, taken in 1886 and titled *Ricking the Reed* (figure 16), is one of forty platinum prints in his 1886 folio *Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads*, an extensive documentation of places and agricultural labour in the Norfolk Broads. In this monochrome image can be seen two men working together in a rural setting, standing amongst cultivated reeds. From the title we can assume they are *ricking* the reeds. One of the men stands on a small boat and in the background can be seen two more boats, one of which has an open sail and is against a straight horizon. This correlates with what is expected on the flat, open marshlands and narrow waterways of the Norfolk Broads, an area where little industry had penetrated at the time (Taylor, 2006: 18). Emerson was known for his naturalist



Figure 16: P.H. Emerson, *Ricking the Reed*, 1886

(straight) photographic style. According to Warner Marien, at a time when technology enabled sharper images, he seized on studies of the human eye and championed what he called *differential* (or *selective*) *focussing* in order to replicate the way a human eye would view the scene. Also, Emerson also chose to shoot in low light as often as possible (Taylor, 2006: 45). These techniques have the effect of softening the scene and equalising the tonal range, which romanticises the view and gives a painterly, pictorial feel. The platinum printing process, known for giving fine graduations of tone, would have further enhanced this effect. Above all, it all looks very peaceful and serene, which belies the hard work that probably characterised the lives of the subjects. Compositionally, the image conforms to standard landscape visual techniques, adhering to the rule of thirds with foreground interest and a river feature that guides you to the open horizon. In terms of his agenda and social circumstances, Emerson studied Medicine at Cambridge University but with the assurance of a private income he chose photography. According to Taylor, he “admired the landless labourers...of

Norfolk because he thought they represented an older, truer England, untouched by progress...and used photography to picture the ‘natives’ as they really were, or more correctly, as he wanted them to appear in photographs” (Taylor, 2006: 14). Taylor also notes that Emerson actually lived on the Norfolk Broads, separating himself from upper and middle classes and insisting on being close to the “natives”. He also insisted he was a bohemian looking for the exotic in regions of underdevelopment (Taylor, 1994: 52). Despite his admiration for rural labourers, in this attitude it could be argued there is an inherent sense of *othering* and *objectification*. Finally, given that Emerson chose platinum printing, an expensive reproduction method, he made the book exclusive and only affordable by the upper-middle classes (Taylor, 2006: 46): in doing so he may have presented the rural poor as objects of curiosity for the consumption of the wealthy. Although Emerson is documented as having a deep respect for his ‘natives’, it is respect with a downward gaze. The production and presentation of his image *Ricking the Reed* is evidently class-driven, and clearly presents a rural idyll at odds with reality, supporting the assertion previously attributed to Clarke (1997: 55).

The second image *Soda Lake* (1867) is by American Timothy O’Sullivan (figure 17), taken during one of the various U.S. Government-funded geological survey exhibitions he attended from 1867 to 1874 (Warner Marien, 2002: 134). We know from the title that it is a lake in a desert, but it is also a desolate wilderness with little aesthetic interest. As Szarkowski notes, “...it’s difficult to imagine a painter of the period being satisfied” (Szarkowski, 1963: 3). The water and sky are bright and featureless. This could have been due to limitations of photographic technology – wet collodian emulsions were notoriously slow – but Jussim and Lindquist-Cock note that O’Sullivan often masked out the sky to leave it featureless (Jussim & Lindquist-Cock, 1985: 41), presumably to enhance the openness of the scene. The two human figures standing at the edge of the lake are seen from behind contemplating the view,



Figure 17: Timothy O’Sullivan, *Soda Lake, Carson Desert*, 1867

with one resting the butt of a rifle on the ground. However, they don’t appear to be the main subject of this image. According to Snyder, human figures in O’Sullivan’s landscapes are not there for scale. Rather, they are often seen in the middle-ground, dwarfed by a landscape, perhaps suggesting an unhappy relationship between humans and nature, a place where “...man is not the measure of things” (Snyder 1994: 197), which epitomises and is arguably influenced by a Friedrich painting. This unhappy relationship is echoed by Jussim and Lindquist-Cock, who note that O’Sullivan intentionally tilted the camera to present the horizon at a nine-degree angle, perhaps to reinforce the sense of ill-feeling (Jussim & Lindquist-Cock, 1985: 3). Snyder also notes that a rhetorical question existed in the 1860s; how could landscape photos be ‘beautiful’ and yet be true to the scientific, mechanical, highly detailed features of the photographic medium? On the evidence of this photo, *beauty* or the pleasure of the viewer does not seem to be O’Sullivan’s intention. The image appears to be one of scientific fact, for a Government and client desperate for information. Little is known

about O'Sullivan's personal agenda, but unlike Watkins, he was unconcerned about the commercial application of photos or selling prints derived from the surveys (Snyder, 1994:191). However, it is claimed that O'Sullivan was directed in many images by his employer Clarence King, a man known for his anti-darwinist theories of catastrophism, which has propagandist undertones. Therefore, although O'Sullivan appears in this image to forego some conventional landscape photography techniques from an aesthetic perspective, the image *is* a product of American expansion and there is evidence to suggest that a specific political agenda directly influenced his work and the representation of rural landscapes.

Clearing Winter Storm (1944) by Ansel Adams is typical of his Yosemite Valley monochrome landscapes (figure 18). It is an overwhelming image of great depth and tonal contrast. The composition encourages the viewer to look through the scene, leading the eye down the tree-covered valley floor to the towering, snow-capped mountains that are draped in the sunlit clouds of a clearing storm. In that sense it certainly conforms to aesthetic conventions of the genre. There is parity between this and the sublime images produced by Carleton Watkins in the nineteenth-century, and it is well documented that he excelled in technical aspects of the medium to produce outstanding negatives and prints that further enhance the aesthetic impact of his work. However, to what extent is this image a product of the socio-economic environment in which it was produced? In terms of his social agenda, Adams was part of the *f64* group that shared a philosophical affinity with nature, a relationship that Bright called "touchy-feely Nature worship" (Bright, 1992: 129). In his photography he sought the "...unspoiled in the generally despoiled twentieth-century landscape" (Jussim & Lindquist-Cock, 1985: 22), and his images are mostly devoid of any human presence. As Schama remarks, "...we still remember the way Carleton Watkins or Ansel Adams photographed Yosemite: with no trace of human presence" (Schama, 1995: 7). Research suggests there are religious overtones in his work. Schama notes that he



Figure 18: Ansel Adams, *Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite Valley*, 1944

photographed Yosemite the way he did to sanctify “a religious idea” (Schama, 1995: 9), a claim backed up by Adams himself. In the preface to his book *The Portfolios of Ansel Adams* (1977) he uses the following Walter Whitman quotation: “I say the whole Earth and all the stars are for religion’s sake” (cited in Jussim & Lindquist-Cock, 1985: 21). Adams also represents the duality of nature in such images – i.e. *Nature* as a primordial force and creative energy, and the stuff of *nature*, such as trees, rocks, rivers, etc. (see Clark, 1949: xvii). During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Adams is quoted as saying, rather insensitively, that there was “...real social significance in a rock – a more important significance therein than a line of unemployed”, which alludes to his social status but also highlights his passion for the natural and absolute belief in what it symbolises. Spaulding notes that Adams saw it as his “personal mission” to use his images to help conserve and protect the American wilderness from the threat of progress (Spaulding, 1995: 217-8), which, from a cultural perspective, is in opposition to the work of Watkins, for example. To that end, Adams set

about an extended project on the National Parks that resulted in several immensely popular books, and images such as *Clearing Winter Sun* have come to define the American West. To summarise, there are a number of cultural influences in this image: firstly, the social and aesthetic motives of Adams and led him to produce a flawless, epic image; secondly, the extent of his success should certainly be considered a factor in the scale of the reproduction, consumption and reinforcement of a sublime, unsullied Wilderness; and thirdly, this reach is a significant factor in recycling the symbols of nationhood that this Adams image represents.

Conclusion

This short discourse and limited analysis of photographic imagery has examined the extent to which the rural landscape in American and British landscape photography is socially constructed, as opposed to merely being the result of the aesthetic or personal agenda of the photographer. Throughout the essay two main lines of enquiry were followed: 1) the development of the rural landscape in art; and 2) the cultural development of landscape photography in the nineteenth-century, with particular focus on the impact of the painted image as an aesthetic catalyst. Firstly, the research found that the concept of *Landscape* was a European concept and cultural construct from the outset, that it was sustained and culturally expressed through the painted landscape image because of socio-economic and class-based trends such as industrialisation, travel, social mobility, the role of landscape as an aesthetic experience, and an inherent social need to establish symbols of nationhood and unity, which fuelled demand for the picturesque and the pastoral traditions of the rural idyll. Secondly, the examination of landscape photography in the nineteenth-century echoed these trends, particularly the key impact of the picturesque aesthetic and the need to sustain through the landscape image strong symbols of nationhood and unity in the face of progress and social

development, albeit it for different reasons in America and Britain. Finally, the deconstruction of three landscape images found, in addition to the visual strategies used by the photographers to enhance aesthetic effect, there was a mix of class-, economic- and culturally-based factors that influenced the representation of the rural landscape in relation to the different social-economic dynamic in the respective countries and periods. All of which supports the assertion that Landscape is indeed a “cultural instrument” (Andrews, 1999: 15). Therefore, based on these points it seems entirely appropriate to conclude, in the context of this research, that rural landscape photographs *can* be argued to be a social construct in that they are a direct and indirect product of the cultural, economic and political context in which they are both produced and consumed.

As a final point, it should be noted, that there are limitations to this research and therefore to the conclusiveness of the findings. Generally speaking, a wider-reaching and more indepth examination of the twentieth-century period and photographers would provide a more comprehensive examination and/or comparison of the cultural development of landscape photography, particularly from the post-WWII era up to the present day, during which was a significant period of cultural, social and technological change. In addition, there are opportunities for further research into the extent to which landscape photography is specifically used as a political instrument; the use of landscape imagery for propaganda in the Great Depression or WWII, for example. Alternatively, in the post-modern period there are the images of the American *New Topographics* photographers such as Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams (see Bright, 1992), whose dispassionate images are in direct contrast to the sublime traditions of photographers of the American West (figure 19); or perhaps the *oppositional* landscapes of photographers such as Jem Southam (figure 20) and Keith Arnatt, whose images are modern-day interpretations of the collision between nature and culture (Taylor, 1994: 240). Finally, given that a viewer’s relationship to the landscape can also be considered to be a cultural construct, a significant omission in this research is the extent to

which the nature of a landscape image changes under a motivating gaze, and the way in which the viewer themselves invest landscape images with meaning (see Urry, 1995; Rosand, 1992).



Figure 19: Robert Adams, *Eden, Colorado*, 1968-71



Figure 20: Jem Southam, *The Red River*, 1985

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