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Timothy O'Sullivan, 'Tufa Domes,  
Pyramid Lake', Nevada, 1868.

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# Land Matters

Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity

Liz Wells

**I.B. TAURIS**

LONDON · NEW YORK

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Published in 2011 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd  
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010  
www.ibtauris.com

Distributed in the United States and Canada Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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International Library of Cultural Studies 6

ISBN: 978 1 84511 864 8 (pb)  
978 1 84511 865 5 (hb)

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library  
A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro by Free Range Book Design & Production Limited  
Printed and bound in Spain

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You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.

Mark Twain, 1889

Sometimes Alice felt tall, able to see the things around her, confident in occupying her space – except occasionally when she bumped her head on the ceiling and remembered not to take anything for granted. Sometimes she felt small, insignificant and imperceptible relative to the place and circumstances around her. That was the nature of Wonderland.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, 1865

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## PREFACE

In 1992 I visited Rotterdam to see *Wasteland*, a major international exhibition of photography relating to land and environment. Seven British photographers were included, none of whom were women. This led to various animated discussions about women and landscape photography, which became the start of a longer investigation into landscape traditions in Britain and elsewhere. This book thus results from many years of interest in landscape photography, provoked initially from questioning why there seemed to be relatively few women landscape photographers working in Britain in the 1980s and 90s. This questioning led to curatorial involvement in two exhibitions on British-based women landscape photographers, namely, *Viewfindings: Women Photographers, 'Landscape' and Environment* (1994) and *Shifting Horizons: Women's Landscape Photography Now* (2000); it also led to *Facing East: Contemporary Landscape Photography from Baltic Areas* (2004). Some of my happiest times have been spent in studio visits, exhibitions and archives, viewing and discussing photographic imagery (including video) that variously reflects upon land and environment.

Why should this be of interest? In the 1990s landscape, as a genre, was generally not fore-grounded within debates which, at that time, were very preoccupied with the import and impact of digital modes of photography. Yet photographers persist in exploring place in terms of histories, geographies and geologies, focusing on the interaction of people and environment and on shifting ecologies. In the 2000s, with widespread concerns relating to environmental change, imagery relating to land and place has re-emerged with renewed socio-political orientation. Related to this is a developing body of critical literature within which this book is intended to contribute. It brings together ideas and research pursued between 1993 and 2006. The manuscript was completed in December 2007; it does not take into account several interesting papers and bodies of work that have come into the public domain since then.

Why is land and environment of particular interest to me? I have come to acknowledge quite deep-seated motivations and curiosities. I was born and spent my childhood in inner west London. My familiarity with 'landscape' was largely restricted to London parks, summer drives to 'countryside', occasional holidays by car to France, Switzerland or North Italy, and seaside holidays in Sussex and, later, Normandy, where I stayed with a French family who had a home on the coast. I loved being there, enjoying the beach and exploring the lanes, even though my English was not up to naming most of the vegetation, let alone my French. The woods were sometimes scary, the weather could be awesome, the cliff paths steep and challenging, and I never did manage the water-skiing. Yet I can still hear the echoes of the cicadas as we walked down to the beach of an evening. My pen-friend's father ran the orchard; her mother picked mushrooms, and fresh shellfish from rock pools; at night her older brother and friends used to go off *à la chasse* (not strictly legal!). Products of their enterprise would be consumed the next day – a rather different approach to food gathering than doing the shopping in London. There was also an amalgam of local histories and social mores that was difficult to grasp, especially as memories of wartime occupation were not far from the surface. In short, I discovered that rural areas were very much more complex and interesting than the romanticisation of animals and countryside that informed Shell posters, 'Uncle Mac' and children's books – although Grimm's fairytales do pick up this undertow. My interest in landscape imagery thus has root in curiosity about the 'otherness' of countryside that interacted with a fascination with Frenchness as 'difference', for which the evidence was derived from my annual month in the country on the Normandy coast.

I now live in Southeast Devon, an area characterised by craggy red cliffs. Echoes, perhaps, of the Normandy *falaises*.



---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should acknowledge many discussions about landscape photography with all those, nationally and internationally, whose work has been included in books I have edited and exhibitions that I have curated. I must stress that this book is not an overview; there are many photographers/artists whose ideas have influenced my thinking, whose company I have enjoyed, but whose work is not specifically referenced – the range of examples of critical practices is simply too extensive to be encompassed in one book. There are also areas of the world that I have not touched upon but that I know include photographers whose work is interesting and challenging in terms of engagement with land and environment.

I should also thank staff and students involved with the Land/Water and the Visual Arts research group at the University of Plymouth, a source of many interesting events and discussions. I am very grateful for the support of colleagues, particularly Liz Nicol and Jem Southam and also to the many friends with whom, over the years, I've had interesting and lively discussions about place, land and landscape. Naming names is invidious – there is always a sense of having failed to mention someone crucial – but I am particularly grateful to David Bate, Deborah Bright, Ann Chwatsky, Ingrid Pollard, Derrick Price, Jorma Puranen, Shirley Read and Elizabeth Williams for various conversations since the mid-1990s. Several chapter sections were first explored through various conference papers; I am grateful for the comments, feedback and references that participants generously shared.

The book would not have happened without the help and support of staff at I.B.Tauris, especially my editors, Philippa Brewster and Susan Lawson, and production team, Paul Tompsett and Cecile Rault. I am specifically grateful to the University of Plymouth for funding the extra costs incurred in colour reproduction. Particular thanks are due to the many photographers whose work is illustrated. I am also hugely indebted to Claire Carter and to Kate Isherwood, who between them

undertook the massive job of sorting out permissions and collating images for reproduction.

The University of Plymouth supported study leave in 2003, and an AHRC small grant in that year facilitated travel in Scandinavia and the Baltic States to research my exhibition, *Facing East*, thereby enabling engagement with materials later used in Chapter 5. I should also thank all the curators and archivists – too many to name – who have given me so much time and help on various research trips; these include staff at George Eastman House, Rochester; Center for Creative Photography, Tucson; Knud Knudsen collection, Bergen; the Photography Museum, Helsinki; Hasselblad Foundation, Gothenburg.

Finally, none of this could have been thought through, let alone written, without the formative and provocative context of feminist, post-structuralist and post-colonial debates that fostered my thinking about visual practices.

Liz Wells

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## INTRODUCTION

The camera eye is the one in the middle of our forehead, combining how we see with what there is to be seen.

(Wright Morris, 1999: 11)

... to supply a production apparatus without trying, within the limits of the possible, to change it, is a highly disputable activity even when the material supplied appears to be of a revolutionary nature. For we are confronted with the fact ... that the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication is capable of assimilating, indeed of propagating, an astonishing amount of revolutionary themes without ever seriously putting into question its own continued existence or that of the class which owns it.

(Benjamin, 1977: 94)

'Land Matters' is a play on words: taken rhetorically, it means that land is important; taken literally, the phrase references business relating to land. It also refers to the 'matter' or substance of land, to soil chemistry. This book is concerned with ways in which photographers engage issues about land, its representation and idealisation. Representation of land as landscape, whether in romantic or in more topographic modes, reflects and reinforces contemporary political, social and environmental attitudes. This is seated within and influences cultural identity, which can be defined as a complex and fluid articulation of the subjective and the collective that draws into play a range of factors such as class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, but is by no means limited to these social formations.

Landscape is a social product; particular landscapes tell us something about cultural histories and attitudes. Landscape results from human intervention to shape or transform natural phenomena, of which we are simultaneously a part. A basic useful definition of landscape thus would

be *vistas encompassing both nature and the changes that humans have effected on the natural world*. But, in considering human agency in relation to land and landscape we also need to bear in mind that, biologically, we are an integral element within the ecosystem. Such considerations, whether framed in terms, for instance, of bio-forensics, or of Buddhist epistemologies, cannot be addressed here. Suffice it to note that our relation to the environment in which we find ourselves, and of which we form a part, is multiply constituted: the real, perceptions of the real, the imaginary, the symbolic, memory and experience, form a complex tapestry at the heart of our response to our environment, and, by extension, to landscape imagery.

### SPACE AND PLACE

Discussing *Landscape and Power* W.J.T. Mitchell argued that landscape is best used not as a noun, but as a verb, 'to landscape' (Mitchell, 1994). This acts as a useful reminder that landscape results from human action, whether from direct intervention to make changes on the land (town planning, landscape architecture, gardening ...), or from exploring how land might be represented (in writing, art, film, photography, or everyday journalism and casual conversation). To 'landscape' is to impose a certain order. Landscaping involves working with natural phenomena. Environmental interventions anticipate natural change and development: growth of trees and plants; weathering of buildings, furniture, statues; animal behaviour; erosion of the earth by rain, river or sea; and so on. Assumptions may also be made about social uses of designed places (parks, gardens, picnic spots ...). Plans are predicated on imagining types of land use, landscape and social environment that might be constructed. Whether industrial, agricultural or domestic, urban, suburban or rural, space is (trans-)formed into place through such interventions.

'Space' is conceptually complex and etymologically slippery (sometimes apparently contradictory). It may refer to that which is not known, and thus cannot be precisely categorised (for instance, 'outer space'). It may reference expanses of land, or of time, with potential – as in 'space' for development, 'space' to play, 'space' to think ... 'Living space' or 'play space' indicate determinate areas within which function is specified (but precise use – lifestyle, or games played – may be fluid). Excursions into

mountains, desert, across seas, to remote islands or regions, to 'wilderness', may be seen as offering 'space' for self-replenishment.<sup>1</sup>

Space also refers to that which exists between the determinate; for instance, distance between identifiable geographical points, or the interval between words or lines on a page, or gaps left open for specific functions. This in-betweenness may be categorical (measurable), or, following French philosopher and linguist Jacques Derrida, it may be taken as an arena of slippages testifying to the fluidity of meaning. 'Space' flows around the determinant, the quantifiable, inducing metaphysical unboundedness, the poetic, indeterminacy, voidness. To be void is to be meaningless, to lack designation. In semiotic terms, a void functions relationally through lending meaning to that which surrounds it – for example, space beyond the edge of a mountain peak or cliff transforms the land edge into precipice (and lends urgency to holding that ground). Voidness involves existential incomprehensibility; to 'touch the void' is to risk the trauma of uncertainty.

The act of naming is an act of taming. In Western culture, describing space as desert, or wilderness, or planet, represents potential comprehensibility and cues scientific and philosophical enquiry. By naming I mean both the terming of a space as, for example, wilderness, and the naming of such space, for example, Antarctica. Naming turns space into place. Once named we no longer view somewhere as unknowable – although as yet relatively little may be known. Likewise, of course, *familiar* places are those that have come to seem 'known'. There is a political dimension: for instance, 'wilderness' or 'outer space' may also be seen as that which has not yet been territorialised economically, geographically or astronomically.

Geography, through naming and investigation, crucially contributes to defining place. Geo means earth, so geo-graphy literally means earth 'drawing', encompassing diagrams, maps, graphs, writings and photographs. Geography is concerned with knowledge about place, communicable in various modes, including the pictorial. Landscape as a genre within visual art shares investigative concerns with geography and feeds into geographic imagination. As has been acknowledged in recent developments in cultural geography, space is rendered into place through representation, the domain of the cartographers and artists, as well as writers and storytellers; through their maps and charts draughtsmen and women contributed to developing pictorial semiotics. From its inception photography has been involved in investigating and detailing environments, helping culture to appropriate nature. Just as it

is the responsibility of philosophers to think about how we think, artists, including photographers, along with art theorists, have responsibility to consider how we picture, to reflect upon the implications of thinking through the visual.

### SPACE AND REPRESENTATION

The pictorial offers more than graphic representation. It articulates subjective memory and cultural currencies not only in relation to literal readings of images but also in terms of emotive affects. We may look at a picture, which is essentially mute, yet respond to sounds associated with the type of scene depicted. A form of sensory memory resonates, enhancing our pleasure in reverie; the geographic imaginary conjured up is complex. In discussing *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard emphasised the relation between the experiential, the real, and the imaginary (Bachelard, 1994). In this series of essays he distances himself from French (structuralist) philosophy, which he critiques for its lack of interest in the distinction between mind and what he terms 'soul' that is evident in the German tradition. Bachelard's enquiry into human response to space sits alongside discussions of beauty and the sublime that have been central to art theory. He explores what he terms 'topophilia' in relation to human desire for the comfort of familiar spaces, wondering at the subjective processes whereby certain spaces – or images of such spaces – come to reassure. His starting point is the human imaginary, and that which cannot be cast in terms of logic, words or explanation, but which induces depth of sensory response to the extent that an image or feeling resonates and haunts. Such experience is essentially subjective, and, since such a poetic imaginary resists definitive communication, it is difficult to know to what extent sensory affects echo similarly or differently for each of us. He explores the phenomenological import of poetic imagery, resisting reductionist containment in terms of the scientific, semiotic or psychoanalytic. This poses problems for relevant, academic explanatory systems, more at ease within the systematic, the logical. At the same time he is concerned to explore emotional ramifications of sensory responses which elide precise definition. He explores ways in which art enhances experience, viewing art as significantly more than mere representation. He suggests that to read poetry is to daydream. Likewise, perhaps, contemplating

photographs. Bachelard locates himself slightly apart from contemporary French philosophy although, epistemologically, his position in some respects parallels the distinction that French feminist philosopher, Julia Kristeva, makes between the systematic and the poetic, suggesting that the latter disrupts the former. Where they differ, of course, is in her concern with gender traits; for Kristeva it is the 'feminine' operations of poetics that interfere with patriarchal social order (see Chapter 4).

In Western philosophy, culture and nature have been posited as a binary with culture viewed as superseding, and thereby repressing, nature. There has also been an association of the masculine with culture, and the feminine with nature. But culture and nature are complexly inter-related, as, indeed, are masculinity and femininity. Nature is both 'internal', fundamental to what constitutes us as human, and 'out there' in that we experience the external world through the senses, including sight. Writing on reason, in the mid-seventeenth century, the philosopher, René Descartes, posited an ontological separation of mind and body, which in turn supported the notion that the human subject is existentially separate from phenomena perceivable through the senses. Cartesian thinking emphasises ego-centrality as each individually encounters and attempts to make sense of experience. In this formulation 'nature' becomes a source of pleasure and bewilderment experienced through touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight. Implicit within this approach is the suggestion that whilst we experience sensation bodily our rational mind retains an observational and analytic stance.

The representation of nature, in still life or in landscape, offers opportunities for extended contemplation of scenes and scenarios. But landscape pictures, composed in accordance with the rules of perspective, offer a single, central viewing position; this draws upon and contributes to reaffirming the Cartesian – and Catholic – emphasis on unique subjectivity. Spectatorship becomes, in effect, a symbolic exercise of control – of mind over matter – articulated via the pleasures of contemplation. But the pleasure of looking carries inherent risk as images of less benign aspects of nature may invoke more sublime insecurities. Desire, awe of natural phenomena, drive to subdue nature, fear of loss of control, all variously play within the contradictory delights of looking at images that disturb. Imagery feeds our desire for a clear sense of identity and of cultural belonging; critical imagery may question that previously accepted. This is a continuous process of apprehension and reassurance, especially since identity is neither uniform, nor fixed,

and is constantly subject to challenge and shift. In other words, any sense of self-location through the contemplation of the photographic image is temporary. Indeed, desire for reassurance may be one of the factors propelling us to keep on making and looking at images. In addition, in terms of a politics of representation, imagery offers us ways of comprehending phenomena and experiences; photographic perceptions influence ways of seeing. For this reason *what* is represented, *how* it is represented, and *who* has the power to represent constitute contested terrain.

The content of images may seem natural. But representational and interpretative processes are cultural in that they are anchored in aesthetic conventions. Photographs substitute for direct encounter; they act as surrogates, mediating that which was seen through the camera viewfinder. Visuality, that is, systems of seeing, operates through codes and conventionalised meanings. Conventions are not entirely arbitrary. Pictorial constructs echo human vision. On a clear day, viewed from sea level, the horizon is just under five kilometers away; this is a function of the curve of the earth. It appears linear, *horizontal*; the etymology is not coincidence! Leonardo da Vinci posited human desire for order, and considered ways in which this is reflected in aesthetic modes. Mediaeval draughtsman, Leon Alberti, drawing on the architectural principles explored by Filippo Brunelleschi, achieved a geometric method of simulating perspective; it became the means of representational construction central to landscape aesthetics. Again, this is not an arbitrary conceit. The camera obscura, and, indeed, the reflection on the wall in Plato's cave caused by light entering through a hole, both suggest that perspective as a basis for visual organisation is founded in a natural effect – it is what light does if siphoned through a gap. The golden mean (or golden rule) central to the representation of land as landscape since the Renaissance is likewise founded in natural phenomena. Imagine being at sea; in calm conditions the horizon appears about one-third of the way up in our line of vision. The sky dominates within the pictorial plane. On land, mountains, trees and other phenomena may protrude into the space of the sky, but the rule of thirds may still form the primary representational structure. Three is a primary number – it cannot be sub-divided. The conventional division of the picture plane into horizontal thirds and vertical halves articulates mathematical fundamentals. The pictorial system is premised upon order and harmony.

Landscape as a cultural concept thus reflects both perception (how we have come to 'see' and relate to our surroundings) and practical



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