

The Impact of Including or Excluding people in landscape images.

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This essay examines the issues related to the inclusion or exclusion of people in Western landscape paintings and photographs. It critically examines the extent to which this impacts on how the image is understood. The essay draws a conclusion as to the effect or otherwise of including people in landscape images.

Landscape images began with paintings where one can find those that include people and those without. Broadly speaking these landscape paintings were commissioned to demonstrate the wealth of the land owner, as in Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (see fig. 1), and often showed the owner lording over his lands and in control of them.



Fig. 1. *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (about 1750)

Mr. and Mrs. Andrews are carefully posed and are looking over their land. He has a hunting gun and his retriever by his side and she is casually, although a bit stiffly posed. Their ownership and control of their land is evidenced by the way they are posed and their gaze over the fields. This is a perspective advocated by Berger in 1972 where he writes:

They are landowners and their propriety attitude towards what surrounds them is visible in their stance and expressions. (Berger, 2008:107)

This has not necessarily been supported by everyone and Berger, citing Professor Lawrence Gowing writes that:

People in such pictures were engaged in philosophic enjoyment of the Great Principle ... the genuine Light of uncorrupted and unperverted nature. (Berger, *ibid*)

He continues to argue that they nevertheless remain proud landowners at the same time.

The underscoring of his rights and power relate back to the male having the power and Mrs. Andrews has none, which is emphasised by his outfit. The right to hunt however links back to his ownership of the land.

Casual though the outfit may be, it still underlines his right to hunt on his own land and is therefore a symbol of his status. (The National Gallery, 2014-5)

This can be compared with a painting such as *Flatford Bridge* (below) that contains people but where they are not as obviously proclaiming their ownership.

In this painting by John Constable (See fig. 2), a variety of activities are taking place along the banks of the Stour River close to where the Constable family had their business. The painting shows horse-drawn barges which, carried goods up and down the river and had to be disconnected for the barge to be poled under the Flatford bridge. Although we are witnessing some work activities and other more leisurely pursuits in the painting, it does refer



Fig. 2. *Flatford Mill ('Scene on a Navigable River')*
1816–7

back to land ownership and the Constables' business even though it does not directly demonstrate their ownership. On the topic of land ownership Berger writes that the relation between property and art in European culture appears natural to that culture. (Berger, 1972:109) What is therefore being advocated is that an interpretation of people in an image may be making a link to ownership although this may be more tenuous in some images. The concept of ownership may be extrapolated further with regard to colonisation and conquering the 'Wild West' which is discussed later.

There are also landscape paintings in which, there are no people evident, as in Constable's *A Cornfield* (1817) (see fig. 3).



Fig. 3. *A Cornfield* (1817)

This oil sketch was elaborated in Constable's famous 1826 painting *The Cornfield* which, in fact, does include people and animals. Here one is simply presented with a country scene, the idyllic rural environment. Nevertheless, the tracks in the road, the road itself and the fence and gate provide evidence of human settlement, ownership and impact on the natural environment.

Moving on to photographs of the landscape Badger considers that the '*chief reason why photographers make photographs of places is to take the viewer there.*' (Badger 2010:131)

Clarke (1997:55) considers that landscape moves between the basic elements of nature and of rural harmony. This can be equated with the scale proposed by Adams of significance and beauty discussed below. There is the traditional postcard image relating to the rural harmony, linking back to the picturesque and the rural idyllic to which, the tourist is attracted, reminding them of the peaceful landscape to which they can escape from their suburban life. '*A landscape that we rarely see but need to know.*' (Clarke, 1997:67) These images may have a human presence or not. The main element remains the natural beauty of the landscape.

Early photographs similarly include and exclude people. In some of the early landscape photographs of the American West, people were included to provide a sense of scale. This is typical of landscape photographers such as O'Sullivan where he is recording the landscape as a part of a geographical survey and it is necessary to provide viewers back home with a means of understanding the vastness of the landscape. Figure 4 shows this where the cliffs and mountains overwhelm the small figures on the river bank. This also brings to the image a sense of the sublime and may be compared with a painting such as *An Avalanche in the Alps* (1803).



Fig. 4. '*Black Canyon, Colorado River, Looking Above from Mirror Bar.*' (Seasons of 1871, 1872 and 1873)



Fig. 5. *Tufa Domes, Pyramid Lake, Nevada* (1867)

The sublime is defined:

[T]o mean a quality of greatness or grandeur that inspires awe and wonder (Tate, s.d)

O'Sullivan and others would have created this sense of awe and sublime for viewers at home not able to travel into the 'Wilderness' through the inclusion of the small figures. Their presence in the image also reminds the viewer that they have been able to conquer this wilderness.

Robert Adams comments specifically on the inclusion of people in landscapes in order to 'measure Creation'

Contrary to popular expectations, many of the best nature pictures - often the truest and finally most reassuring - do contain people and their works. The strength they add to these photographs from the early 1900s, for instance, is fundamental. By depicting human beings, the pictures forcefully record the scale of nature - something we fully understand only when we measure Creation by the size of our bodies and the things they can affect. (Adams, 1996:104)

O'Sullivan in his Tufa Domes image elects not to include people. One may postulate that Figure 4 was taken deliberately to record the activities of the geological survey, whilst the Tufa Domes image (see fig. 5) was for aesthetic purposes. On this issue Krauss is critical of labelling images as 'Art' when in fact they were never intended to be: she comments;

'Is the interpretation of O'Sullivan's work as a representation of aesthetic values — flatness, graphic design, ambiguity, and behind these, certain intentions towards aesthetic significance: sublimity, transcendence — not a retrospective construction designed to secure it as Art?' (Krauss, 1982)

Her argument is that the interpretation of Tufa Domes done retrospectively places it in the 'Art' discourse whilst in fact this may never have been O'Sullivan's intention. The point is probably moot as a viewer today will interpret this image in their own context bringing to this interpretation their own background knowledge.

At the time that these images were made the USA West was being appropriated from others whose concepts of land ownership were quite different. Yet the surveys that facilitated this appropriation were recorded and provided images that emphasised the conquering of these lands. It is postulated that in comparing these two photographs one is made specifically to record the activities of the survey showing the people involved against a background of the landscape to provide a sense of scale, whilst the Tufa Domes which, was probably also a record at the time, is far more aesthetic with the curve created by the receding domes drawing the viewer into the image. The people provide a context against which to interpret the image in terms of scale and the historical activities. Although there is an element of having conquered the 'wild west' in figure 4, there is no link back to the paintings of land owners looking over their land other than the fact that O'Sullivan has made this image in a painterly fashion. The image therefore becomes more of a documentary record of what was being done and the environment at that time.

This provides a link to the concept of significance versus beauty which, is proposed by Robert Adams who makes a comparison between these opposing poles as follows;

He [Adams] also distinguishes between beautiful photographs and significant ones, suggesting, in effect, that significance emerges from content whereas beauty is an effect of conventions and composition. (Wells, 2011: 66)

An additional question one could debate is whether an image can be both significant and beautiful rather than these concepts being mutually exclusive. The criteria proposed by Adams provide a useful starting point in the classification of landscape images. Using his criteria, *Black Canyon* (fig. 4) is closer to the 'significant' end of the spectrum and *Tufa Domes* (fig. 5) on the more beautiful side as a result of the pleasing composition.

A comparison is made of an image of O'Sullivan's from the American Civil war and other historical and more recent war images.

Figure 6, shows the real horror of war by capturing a landscape which is strewn with bodies of fallen soldiers. Due to equipment limitations making images of live action would not have been possible but he has photographed the immediate aftermath and the bodies bring home directly the reality of war.



Fig. 6. *The battlefield of Gettysburg*, (July 1863)



Fig. 7. *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (1855)

Conversely, Fenton's image from the Crimea (fig. 7) also evidences the aftermath but with an absence of people and only cannonballs on the road. Although there is debate as to how he may have manipulated this scene, the message remains one of the aftermath of war but nevertheless the landscape contains direct evidence of the war and mankind.

Across a desolate and featureless landscape, not a single figure can be found. The landscape is inhabited only by cannonballs — so plentiful that they first appear to be rocks — that stand in for the human casualties on the battlefield. (J. Paul Getty Museum, s.d.)

He too was restricted in his ability to move his heavy equipment and so captured the aftermath rather than being able to capture the live action. (cf. Robert Capa, *Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death* 1936 and Eddie Adams, *Execution of a Suspected Vietcong*, Saigon, 1968).

Fenton made two exposures from the same tripod position: in the first version of the celebrated photograph he was to call "The Valley of the Shadow of Death" (despite the title, it was *not* across this landscape that the Light Brigade made its doomed charge), the cannonballs are thick on the ground to the left of the road, but before taking the second picture — the one that is always reproduced — he oversaw the scattering of cannonballs on the road itself. (Sontag, 2003:43)

The difference is that in Fenton's image the viewer has to interpret an implied message compared with a direct message in O'Sullivan's image. However, one could argue that the role of the cannonballs is the same as that of the bodies as both provide the context of war, only one is more direct than the other. In both instances they are strewn, immobile across the landscape.

Sontag writes about these images with regard to moving objects or bodies saying:

To photograph was to compose (with living subjects, to pose), and the desire to arrange elements in the picture did not vanish because the subject was immobilised, or immobile. (Sontag, 2003:42)

She is thus of the opinion that O'Sullivan would not have hesitated to move a few slain soldiers if it resulted in a better image.

Not surprisingly, many of the canonical images of early war photography turn out to have been staged, or to have had their subjects tampered with. (Sontag, *ibid*:43)

This is no different to Fenton rearranging a few cannonballs as analysed by Errol Morris. (Morris, 2011). In both instances however, we have either bodies or cannonballs standing in for bodies, and these images can therefore be interpreted as having people in them.

One is able to bring this into the modern era with Paul Seawright's 'Fenton' image of shells on the road in Afghanistan (see fig. 8) in which the semiotic message is identical. Seawright's image of unexploded ordinance can therefore be equated to Fenton's cannonballs, and as Badger comments, draws attention to the environmental disaster of modern warfare (Badger, 2010:27). In this instance the danger and damage to the environment persists due to the unexploded ordinance and other damage.

Anti-personnel mines and radioactive pollution from uranium-tipped shells have an insidious, long-term effect. (Badger, 2010:27)

Much of this 'deadly legacy of war' lies hidden under the soil. These are part of the unseen effects of war and play homage to the title of this series of images by Seawright.



Fig. 8. *Afghanistan 2002. From the series Hidden*

Each of the above three images (Figures 6, 7 & 8) lie close to the significant end of the Adams scale rather than presenting the viewer with a beautiful, picturesque landscape.

More recently, Paul Seawright and Chloe Dewe Mathews, have made landscape images related to war in which the message is even more indirect.

These landscapes can be considered as one or two steps removed from war and require greater knowledge on the part of the viewer to interpret.

One can consider these two images (Figs. 9 & 10) in the context of Barthes concept of 'myth'.

'[M]yth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second order semiological system'. (Barthes 1973, cited in Evans 2013:53)



Fig. 9. *Column* (2003)



Fig. 10. *Private Joseph Byers, Private Andrew Evans, Time unknown / 6.2.1915 Private George E. Collins, 07:30 / 15.2.1915 Six Farm, Loker, West-Vlaanderen* (2014)

In figure 9, Seawright has captured a landscape showing destroyed buildings with some large tick marks painted on them. The viewer has to have the back knowledge to know that this is from the war in Afghanistan. There are no people shown but one is able to infer from the buildings that at some time they were here but that as a result of the disaster they have abandoned the area. The title to this series is 'Hidden' and we understand that the people are missing or hidden. Seawright captures the landscape of war drawing attention to the fact that even once the fighting is over there is an impact on those that remain and their environment. Figure 9 shows the landscape in terms of human settlement as well as the destruction of the environment due to war. Human presence is indicated even through their absence.

In Chloe Dewe Mathews image (fig. 10) one is presented with a scene in which we have a peaceful landscape with some farm buildings and fence. There is a tree in the foreground and the scene is probably early morning with some mist still in the background. There are no people in the image but it clearly has signs of human presence and settlement. What is, not evident to the uninformed viewer is that this is the site of an execution. Dewe Mathews has photographed sites where British soldiers were executed by Allied firing squads during World War I for their cowardice or desertion.

'By photographing them, Dewe Mathews is reinserting the individual into that space, stamping their presence back onto the land, so that their histories are not forgotten'. (Dewe Mathews, C, 2014)

"It's the relationship between the text and image that really makes the point." says Dewe Mathews' (Brook, P, 2015)

Figure 10 and similar images made by Dewe Mathews are beautiful and engaging images that one comes back to as a result of their beauty, but also because the viewer is drawn to the horror that took place at the site in the photograph. This element is only understood as a result of the detailed research that she undertook and the names of those executed which, are provided as captions to the images.

The viewer is presented with a beautiful landscape which, on its own, raises interesting questions and only once one is aware of the deeper meanings does the image take on a far greater significance. As with Figure 9, there is an absence of people but through this absence the viewer is made aware of a past presence. Without the associated text the Dewe Mathews images would fall on the beautiful end of the Adams scale whilst the associated text makes them more significant.

The images of Donna Wan in her series *Death Wooded Us*, (2012-14) are of a similar vein to Dewe Mathews as she has photographed beautiful landscapes and it is only when one realises that these are sites of suicides that they take on a deeper meaning.

Figure 11 draws attention to how the understanding of a landscape is influenced by the inclusion of a person.



Fig. 11. *L'Etang* (2012)

In this image we have the photographer, Elina Brotherus, standing looking out over the landscape which has become the object of her gaze. This references the Rückenfigur style where the viewer can identify with the figure in the image and enter the landscape through that identity. Without her presence one would have a simple image of a view that is, in fact, not particularly spectacular. Her presence raises questions in the viewer's mind and creates a gestalt that draws one back into the image for further interrogation. With her back to the viewer and the suggestive way she holds her dress, the male gaze is subverted.

The (male) gaze is, by implication, unseated. But, on the other hand, this is Finnish work and, as has been argued, Finnish culture retains a particular sense of oneness with nature. (Wells, 2011:234)

The presence of a person adds to the complexity of the image, elevating it to a different level when compared with what it would have been without a person. It gains in significance moving it away from the pure beauty end of the Roberts scale.

There are also landscape images where people are present but not dominant (fig. 12 & fig. 13)

Here the people indicate a presence more than playing a dominant role. These can be seen as an intermediate between an absence and being dominant as in figures 10 and 11. In figure 12 we are reminded that not only is the landscape altered or settled by humans but also of the scale of the scene as in figure 4. We are reminded that, 'by depicting human beings, the pictures forcefully record the scale of nature'. (Adams, *ibid*)

Fig. 12. *River Hayle* (2000)Fig. 13. *We English* (2009)

In figure 13 the landscape is more developed and clearly settlement is well established. This is far from the rural idyllic, it is the built suburbia which, is further evidenced by the people relaxing in the park. They show that activity takes place in this built environment.

Finally, consider the situation where the person becomes so prominent that one needs to decide whether the image falls into the portrait or landscape genre as in figure 14, where a single black British subject challenges the concept of the romantic idyllic countryside.

Balanced with a representation of single figures in the landscape that challenge assumptions of identity and ownership (Pollard, 1988)

Pollard places herself into the landscape to challenge ownership and ties in with the concepts of colonisation and also the slave trade with the colonies.

Fig. 14. *Pastoral Interlude* (1988)

"...it's as if the Black experience is only lived within an urban environment. I though I liked the Lake District where I wandered lonely as a Black face in a sea of white. A visit to the countryside is always accompanied by a feeling of unease, dread..."

Her techniques allude to the connections between the high-Victorian pastoral and the colonial control in Africa and the Caribbean that enabled that pastoral's maintenance. (Macfarlane, 2015)

The viewer is asked to consider these issues when placed in an idyllic pastoral landscape that typifies the picturesque of England. However, this is not a natural scene and Pollard comments on this saying:

"Nothing about the scene is really 'natural'. It's as manufactured and deliberate as the assumptions and stereotypes about Black people." (Pollard, 2004, 18 cited in Bertrand, 2014)

The image is considered to be more a portrait placed in a landscape environment than a landscape containing people.

Conclusion

The varying role of people in images may be placed in the discourse of images with human presence. As discussed above the role of people varies from none at all, a presence through absence to being dominant in the image. Although in each of these the meaning that results from the inclusion of people varies, the presence of people tends to increase the significance of the image. This needs some qualification, as where there is a presence through absence, as in Dewe Mathews work *Shot at Dawn*, this significance tends also to be present.

Where the presence of people provides a semiotic element to the image the viewer is challenged to bring a deeper meaning as opposed to simply the natural beauty.

However, in an image where one only has the picturesque landscape one is struck by the beauty of the landscape rather than a more philosophical interpretation.

Landscape images have moved away from the original land ownership or conquering of the unknown to those that generate an understanding of the impact of mankind on the environment.

There is nothing clear cut however and this is summarised by Robert Adams where he concludes an essay saying:

We end with a paradox: in some nature pictures, it is precisely the troublesome, intrusive people who disclose nature's best truths. (Adams, 1996)

Epilogue

As a result of the limited length of this essay, I have had per force to ignore a number of artists that could well be included in this analysis. These include:

Richard Long known for his land art and sculptures made by walking. Richard Misrach who is known for his large-format landscape photographs of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Mississippi River, and the U.S. Mexican border. He has often focused on environmentalist concerns, and the negative effects that humans have had on nature. Many of his images do not have people in them. Eduard Burtynsky who makes images of sweeping views of landscapes that are altered by industry. His images often create a tension with the damaged environments they show and the New Topographics who showed the impact of man on the environment in a flat and impersonal way.

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