

Damaged Landscapes: The Role of Photography and the Challenge of the Beautiful Image

Tahrip Olmuş Peyzajlar: Fotoğrafın Rolü ve Zorlayıcı Güzel İmge

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Çeyiz Makal FAIRCLOUGH¹

Abstract

Landscape photography was initially inspired by landscape painting and concepts of the 'picturesque' and the 'sublime'. It has existed since the invention of the camera and remains a distinctive photographic genre to this day. This paper explores the role of photography in society, especially in highlighting conservation issues. It draws attention to theories underpinning landscape photography and the challenges around realism and authenticity on the one hand and beauty on the other. The author draws on the work of seminal landscape photographers from the nineteenth century to the present day to show how they have responded to these challenges. The author argues that, as we move into an age of unprecedented and catastrophic, man-made damage to the environment, the role of the landscape photographer has become increasingly important. This paper draws attention to the paradox of making beautiful images from damaged or ugly landscapes and raises questions about the potential impact of such images on those who view them. It argues that the concept of the 'sublime', developed by Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century, remains equally valid today. The author focuses also on the responsibilities of the photographer to create images that convey meaning and argues that this can only be achieved through a deep knowledge of the landscape and spending a long time working in the field.

Keywords: Photography, landscape, environment, sublime, aesthetic

Özet

Peyzaj fotoğrafçılığı başlangıçta peyzaj resminden ve "pitoresk" ve "yüce" kavramlarından esinlenmiştir. Peyzaj fotoğrafçılığı fotoğraf makinesinin icadından bu yana var olmuştur ve günümüzde de kendine özgü bir fotoğrafik tür olmaya devam etmektedir. Bu makale, özellikle çevresel sorunların altını çizerek, fotoğrafın toplumdaki rolünü araştırmaktadır. Makale, bir yandan gerçekçilik ve özgünlük öte yandan güzellik ile ilgili çelişkilere değinirken, peyzaj fotoğrafçılığını destekleyen teorilere dikkat çekmektedir. Yazar, fotoğrafçıların bu çeliskiler ile nasıl başa çıktıklarını göstermek için 19. yüzyıldan günümüze çığır açan peyzaj fotoğrafçılarından çalışmalarından yararlanmaktadır. Yazar, çevreye eşi görülmemiş ve felakete yol açan insan yapımı hasarların zamanına girerken, peyzaj fotoğrafçısının rolünün öneminin gittikçe arttığını savunmaktadır. Bu makale, hasarlı veya çirkin manzaralardan güzel imgeler yaratma paradoksuna dikkat çekmekte ve bu imgelerin izleyici üzerindeki etkisini sorgulamaktadır. 18. yüzyılda Edmund Burke tarafından geliştirilen "yüce" kavramı bugün de geçerlidir. Anlam ifade eden imgeler oluşturan fotoğrafçının sorumluluklarına odaklanan yazar, bunun sadece derin bir peyzaj bilgisiyle ve bu alanda uzun süre çalışarak gerçekleşebileceğini tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Fotoğraf, peyzaj, çevre, yüce, estetik

1. Introduction

Landscape is a word that appears to have a simple meaning but, as Jackson points out: ‘...to each of us it appears to mean something different’ (Jackson, 1984, p. 3). Jackson ascribes this complexity to the word’s ancient origins and the fact that it is made up of two component elements ‘land’ and ‘scape’, both of which have a variety of meanings. The important aspects of its meaning, for the purposes of this paper, relate to its aesthetic and emotional associations as well as the implicit human element contained within the concept of shaping the land. Jackson refers to landscape as ‘...not a natural feature of the environment but a synthetic space, a man-made system of spaces superimposed on the face of the land...’ (Jackson, 1984, p. 8) and he suggests a new definition as follows: ‘...a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective existence’ (Jackson, 1984, p. 8). In his seminal work ‘The Making of the English Landscape’, Hoskins views landscape as being fundamentally associated with human activity. His rationale for this is clear: ‘Not much of England, even in its more withdrawn, inhuman places, has escaped being altered by man in some subtle way or other, however untouched we may fancy it at first sight’ (Hoskins, 2013, p. 26). He goes on to frame the development of the landscape in a historical context: ‘The English landscape as we know it today is almost entirely the product of the last 1500 years...’ (Hoskins, 2013, p. 28). When referring to landscape that has not been affected by humans, he qualifies the term by referring to ‘natural landscape’. In her definition of the word, Wells asserts the human component but acknowledges nature also: ‘vistas encompassing both nature and the changes that humans have effected on the natural world’ (Wells, 2011, p. 2).

Landscape photography can cover many different types of photography. Photographs of landscapes can be taken for a variety of specific purposes, such as urban planning. In this context, however, I am referring to photographers who have some artistic or documentary intent, drawing on examples from the late nineteenth, late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to help illustrate the central arguments of this paper. Landscape photography was inspired in the early days of photography by landscape painting: ‘Early photographers interested in art readily pursued pictorial values derived from the genres of painting – one might say photography ‘cannibalized’ the genres and values of painting...In nineteenth-century England, the highest of the academic genres was landscape...’ (Bate, 2009, p. 91). Early landscape photographers, not just in England but also in the USA, aimed to produce aesthetically pleasing images. They were heavily influenced by the concepts of the picturesque and the sublime, which were central to the fine arts. There was however a major shift in the way photographers considered landscape in the second half of the twentieth century. This can in part be explained by the rapid increase in industrialisation after the Second World War and growing environmental concerns. Whereas, previously, photographers, including those with an interest in conservation, had tended to take photographs of landscapes of great natural beauty or landscapes showing a broadly benign human influence, from the 1960s onwards they tended to focus instead on the damage done to the environment from growing industrialisation. It can also be explained by changes in the wider art world in the twentieth century, the development of the avant-garde and a shift in sensibility away from the picturesque and towards the sublime: ‘It must then be obvious why avant-garde art has so often been associated with the aesthetics of the sublime, precisely to invoke the ‘unthinkable’ in society’ (Bate, 2009, p. 105). Landscape photographers, like the artists of the avant-garde, sought to challenge their viewers rather than provide comforting, aesthetically pleasing images.

The sublime and the picturesque: early landscape photographers

The eighteenth century was a critical period for the development of theories on beauty, which still have resonance and relevance today. Edmund Burke, an eighteenth-century philosopher, set out his theories on the sublime and how it differed from the concept of beauty in his 1757 book: 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful'. The concept of the sublime had a major impact on fine art at the time and subsequently on landscape photography. Bate describes the sublime as 'a space associated with danger, a place that is threatening, fearful and given an aura of menace' (Bate, 2009, p. 94). Alexander refers to the sublime in opposition to beauty as follows: 'Where beauty was the domain of contentment and harmony – a gentle and enjoyable experience of something – the sublime prompted unsettled feelings and emotional awakening' (Alexander, 2015, p. 70). Wells also refers to the sublime as '...associated with awe, danger and pain, with places where accidents happen, where things run beyond human control, where nature is untameable.' (Wells, 2011, p. 48). She also comments on Burke's theory that pain is a stronger emotional force than pleasure and adds '...if pain or danger are too imminent, they are simply terrible, but if held at some distance they are pleasurable' (Wells, 2011, p. 48). This analysis helps to explain the power of the 'sublime' image, whether it is a painting or a photograph, in that it can stir a strong emotion in a safe context. The photograph by Timothy O'Sullivan below (figure 1) was taken on a geological survey and helps to show how challenging and inhospitable the landscape is for humans, with the towering cliffs. It is a good example of the use of the sublime to create a sense of awe in the viewer. The sheer cliff face dominates the photograph, showing the power and permanence of the natural landscape in comparison to the crumbling man-made buildings. The composition of the photograph presents the viewer with an image where there is no visible way in or out of the buildings on the other side of the canyon. Despite human efforts, nature is untameable.

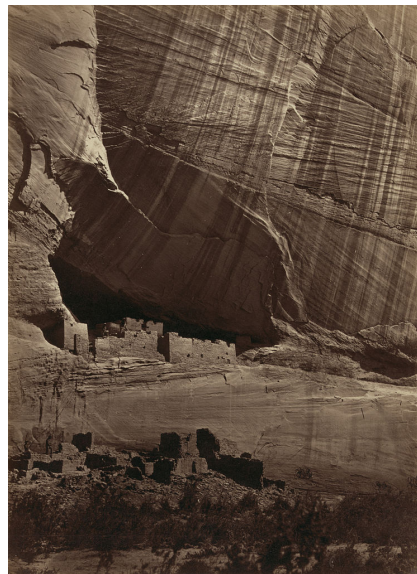


Figure 1. Ancient Ruins in the Canon De Chelle, New Mexico, 1873 by Timothy O'Sullivan.

The concept of the picturesque was also developed in the eighteenth century, partly in response to the work of Edmund Burke. William Gilpin and others sought to further

develop his theories on beauty and began using the term 'picturesque'. According to Bate (2009), the picturesque is about an idealised version of the countryside, often used for instance to promote tourism. Alexander (2015) goes further and suggests that the 'picturesque' is a highly subjective view of the landscape which seeks to play down the link between landscape and any social, political or economic conflicts. He argues as follows: 'Everything is not only visually balanced in terms of composition of the picture, but there is an allusion toward social harmony as well' (Alexander, 2015, p. 64). The development of the picturesque coincided with the growth of tourism, especially the increasing numbers of wealthy English visitors to Italy who brought back Italian paintings. This in turn had an impact on landscape gardeners such as Capability Brown who developed gardens that resembled the images in the paintings. As Bate points out, this ironically resulted in landscape imitating art: '...paintings were the models upon which these 'designs' for organising the land were actually based; a reversal of the usual assumption that pictures are secondary representations of a pre-existing world' (Bate, 2009, p. 91). The photograph by Roger Fenton below (figure 2) is an example of how the aesthetic of the picturesque influenced photography in nineteenth century England. The photograph is carefully composed to give pleasure and is suggestive of harmony and order.



Figure 2. The Terrace and Park at Harewood House, 1860 by Roger Fenton.

Wells provides a very useful summary of how the sublime and the picturesque differ. It is partly about what is represented but also it relates to the response in the viewer:

"In relation to land and landscape, very roughly speaking, mountains are associated with the sublime, hills with picturesque; sea with the sublime, rivers and canals with the picturesque... It does not follow from this that mountains or sea are always sublime; it is not the physical presence in itself so much as the mood induced in the onlooker... Relative scale may be the key factor; the majesty of a lake, or a fjord with mountains rising around it, is sublime not in the sense of actual danger so much as in the reminder of our relative insignificance and of the transience of self" (Wells, 2011, p. 48-49).

As we shall see, the aesthetics developed in the eighteenth century remain relevant today, despite the huge transformations that have occurred in our attitudes towards the natural world and man- altered landscapes.

Beauty and truth in the modern age

In the early days of photography, landscape photographers tended to focus on beautiful subjects or at least composed images in such a way as to give a more pleasurable viewing experience. This is apparent in the images shown above. Sontag (1979) points out that this is still the aim of most amateur photographers. She suggests however that things have moved on: '...ambitious professionals, those whose works get into museums, have steadily drifted away from lyrical subjects, consciously exploring plain, tawdry, or even vapid material. In recent decades, photography has succeeded in somewhat revising, for everybody, the definitions of what is beautiful and ugly...' (Sontag, 1979, p. 28). She maintains that: 'Nobody ever discovered ugliness through photographs. But many, through photographs, have discovered beauty' (Sontag, 1979, p. 85). She argues that what motivates people to take photographs is finding something beautiful, which can involve seeing even ugly things as beautiful, and that even when photographers focus on harsh subjects 'photography still beautifies' (Sontag, 1979, p. 102). This paradox points to 'the challenge of the beautiful image', referred to in the title of this paper. Photographers who explore difficult and harsh subjects, who photograph for example inherently ugly and damaged landscapes, will often still strive to create beautiful images. By taking an image they are conferring importance and value onto the subject and viewers will inevitably consider the image from an aesthetic perspective. The challenge for the photographer relates to the potential disconnect between the aesthetic and the conceptual. If the photographer is trying to communicate an uncomfortable truth about environmental degradation and the image is beautiful, the question arises as to whether the message is compromised by the form.

Bate (2009) indicates that the theoretical discussions in the early days of photography tended to focus on two distinct but linked issues. The first issue was: '...how far is photography able to copy things accurately? Can we 'trust' photographs as accurate representations of the things they show?' (Bate, 2009, p. 26). The second issue was '...if photography copies things, how can it be art?' (Bate, 2009, p. 26). The postmodern critique of photography tends to reverse the above paradigm. It is now accepted that photographs are subject to all manner of distortions, either deliberate or unintentional, and like other art forms is a subjective interpretation of the world. This raises questions around the essential truthfulness of the image. John Tagg (1988) explains that, given these distortions, the relationship between the photograph and any prior reality is deeply problematic. Pink (2007) also points to the impossibility of capturing a complete authentic record.

Despite the difficulties outlined above, photographers continue to wrestle with the challenges of beauty on the one hand and truth on the other. Sontag sees this as a conflict: 'The history of photography could be recapitulated as the struggle between two different imperatives: beautification...and truth-telling' (Sontag, 1979, p. 86). Various theorists have grappled with the difficulties of saying something that is true, whilst accepting the postmodern critique alluded to above. In his essay entitled 'Truth and Landscape' Robert Adams (1996) indicated that landscape photography can provide three types of information: geography, autobiography and metaphor. He argues that by providing this information the photograph can be understood as truthful by the viewer. On autobiography, for example, he says the following: 'Making photographs has to be, then, a personal matter; when it is not, the results are not persuasive. Only the artist's presence in the work can convince us that its affirmation resulted from and has been tested by human experience' (Adams, 1996, p. 15). In connection with the third strand of information, metaphor, he writes: '...what we hope from the artist is help in discovering the significance of a place' (Adams, 1996, p. 16). For Adams therefore photographs that provide this information can offer the viewer something that is truthful or authentic. There is no inherent clash with aesthetic considerations.

Other theorists have also highlighted the importance of the conceptual aspects of the image. Professor Howard Becker, a leading sociologist of the second Chicago School of Sociology, was concerned with authenticity and truth in photography. Becker (1978) argues that photographs need to do more than just express the photographer's own personal vision. They should provide some insight into a reality that is external to the photographer. He argues that it is not reasonable to ask whether a photograph is true or not. Instead he suggests that we consider what the photograph is telling the truth about, what questions the photograph might be answering. Charles Suchar, a photographer and sociologist, developed Becker's theories into what he described as the interrogatory principle of documentary photography and wrote '...photographs are used as a way of answering or expanding on questions about a particular subject' (Suchar, 1997, p. 34). This idea is not dissimilar to what Adams is suggesting through metaphor; he is emphasizing the importance of the meaning and significance of what is being photographed. Becker (1978) also discusses what he terms 'threats to validity', which include access, artistic intent, manipulation of photographs and staging, photographer's theory, censorship and editing. He argues that when viewing an image, the viewer needs to reflect on these possible issues in order to make an informed judgement about the truthfulness of the image. Becker was focusing on the sociological value of photographs, but his theories are relevant also for landscape photographers, especially those photographers who focus on major issues of our age such as environmental degradation and climate change. As we are living in an age of unreliable information and there is a public tendency to distrust even authoritative sources, it is incumbent upon landscape photographers who seek to address major issues to be alert to possible accusations of distortion as they pursue their artistic goals.

Damaged landscapes: modern perspectives

Photographers have responded to the challenges outlined above in a variety of ways. There are for example approaches to landscape photography that emphasize blandness and neutrality, that deliberately reject any personal perspective, emotion or sense of beauty. Alexander (2015) refers to a celebrated exhibition in 1975 called: 'New Topographics: Photographs of a Man- Altered Landscape'. This exhibition was highly influential in the development of a deadpan, almost mechanical approach to landscape photography which selected the mundane or the bland as the focus of attention and

downplayed the personal perspective of the photographer: 'Technical rigour (for example, precision of exposure and framing) remained a facet of this deadpan aesthetic, but artiness (darkroom effects, layered composition, and visual lyricism) was expunged' (Alexander, 2015, p. 128). The exhibition included the works of ten landscape photographers including Robert Adams, Bernd and Hilla Becher and Lewis Baltz, and focused on the new topography of late twentieth century North America. The approach is reminiscent of the style of earlier social documentary photographers, including for example Walker Evans who documented American life in the 1930s. These photographers were clearly focusing more on saying something that is true than producing beautiful images. It is possible to view these images in the way suggested by Becker (1978) and understand what questions they are answering, what they are telling the truth about. There is an authenticity or validity in these images as the viewer is not distracted by the artist's personal vision or any of the other 'threats to validity' mentioned by Becker (1978). However, despite the subject matter and efforts to play down lyrical or personal elements, the images from New Topographics are still aesthetically pleasing and do possess a certain beauty. As Sontag's pointed out: 'photography still beautifies' (Sontag, 1979, p. 102).

This deadpan and mechanical style can be seen in the images of Robert Adams. In the image below (figure 3), one can see how people are encroaching on the rural landscape. It contrasts with the images of Ansel Adams and others who documented the wide-open spaces of the United States and makes the landscape look smaller. The image is informative, restrained and well-constructed. The photographer plays down any aesthetic or personal considerations and instead documents a social phenomenon, the increasing presence of mobile homes in rural landscapes.



Figure 3. Mobile Homes Jefferson County Colorado 1973 by Robert Adams.

Instead of downplaying aesthetic considerations, like Robert Adams and the other photographers of the New Topographics', some contemporary photographers, such as Burtynsky, who is discussed below, adopt a more stylised approach to reconciling the potentially conflicting demands of beauty and truth. By drawing on an aesthetic that originates in concepts of 'the sublime', photographers have a way of bringing together the potential disconnect between form and subject. If the subject of the image is something that may evoke awe or fear, such as large-scale environmental destruction, it is reasonable to use an aesthetic that accentuates that emotional response.

The eighteenth century concept of the sublime has been remarkably resilient, given the massive changes that have taken place to the physical landscape in the last two hundred and fifty years as well as the major shifts in artistic sensibility and related intellectual disciplines. Indeed, it seems as if the sublime has taken on a new lease of life in recent decades as fears about the environment have grown. The eighteenth century concept of the picturesque has, however, fared less well as people no longer believe in the ideals of order that underpin that concept. Idealised rural landscapes are rarely now the subjects of professional photography. The link with tourism though remains and picturesque images are still likely to be found in tourism brochures or other marketing materials. It is important here to acknowledge the importance of context. As Becker states, 'Photographs get their meaning, like all cultural objects, from their context' (Becker, 1998, p. 88). Wells (2011) points out that images can be viewed as either picturesque or sublime depending on the mood induced in the onlooker. It is likely that the response of the viewer to the image will be significantly affected by the context in which the viewer sees the image. It is possible therefore that an image in one context may be perceived as sublime and in another as picturesque.

Alexander (2015) refers to the term 'industrial sublime' and suggests that the legacy of the sublime is most clear in recent images that show the interaction between industry and the environment. He describes the way it has been adapted from the eighteenth century as follows: 'Mountains are replaced by cooling towers; vast open spaces by dams and bridges; tributaries of water with highways and intersections; and brooding storm clouds with plumes of acrid smoke' (Alexander, 2015, p. 122). In connection with Edward Burtynsky's 2012 exhibition 'The Industrial Sublime' Alexander writes: '...the industrial sublime prompts a realisation of the collective force of man and the significance of his unrelenting impact upon nature' (Alexander, 2015, p. 122). Indeed, it is this point that informs Burtynsky's most recent project 'Anthropocene', which addresses the idea that we have moved into a new geological age of irreversible man-made damage to the environment.

The term 'toxic sublime' has also been applied to Burtynsky's work. In an article on Burtynsky's exhibition 'Manufactured Landscapes' Carol Diehl summarizes Burtynsky's artistic style and explains how this helps to support an understanding of the harsh subject matter:

"What's even more unexpected than the alien locales Burtynsky portrays is that these depictions of ravagement emanate an overwhelming beauty, for despite his choice of subject matter these photographs are, before anything else, works of art. Far from using the flattened, deadpan approach cultivated by many contemporary photographers, Burtynsky, with a painter's eye for color and a sculptor's eye for form, displays an uncool preoccupation with composition and light. This is gritty subject matter rendered in a romantic way, and it is this incongruity that makes these pictures so compelling... While always aware of the devastated nature of what we're viewing, we keep on looking because there's always some visual pleasure to engage us, whether in the lyrical graphic and sculptural elements we take in from far away, or in the minute, sharp-focused details that are revealed up close." (Diehl, 2006)

Despite the strong endorsement of his approach above, there are differences of opinion about Burtynsky's work, especially in relation to the potential conflict between subject matter and form: 'Some have similarly criticised the likes of Burtynsky for representing pressing environmental concerns within the aesthetic dialect of the sublime, eroding its

socio-political imperative by reducing the subject to visual spectacle' (Alexander, 2015, p. 123). Furthermore, it is possible that the 'threats to validity' that Becker (1978) refers to could occur to viewers of Burtynsky's work. There is the obvious artistic intent and viewers might wonder whether the images have been manipulated or staged in any way. On Burtynsky's own website, in a review of his famous image showing a bright orange river (figure 4), the reviewer acknowledges that the viewer might wonder if the colour had been achieved through some manipulation or other but will conclude that it is indeed a true image. This image draws in fact on both the sublime and the picturesque; the sublime in the emotion that it creates, one of unease, and the picturesque in terms of subject matter, a meandering river. This image could be seen in fact as a subversion of the picturesque, as the scene is far from reassuring when one understands what it shows. There is a shock value to this image, an incongruity which derives from its associations with traditional picturesque imagery of meandering rivers. This highlights however a potential problem. As mentioned above, context is all important. When one understands what this image refers to, the polluting effects of metal mining on the landscape, it inspires those feelings typically associated with the sublime. Framed in an exhibition with supporting text or caption, or on the photographer's website, the troubling nature of the image is clear. However, if taken out of context, it is possible that a viewer might see the colour of the river as an extraordinary or beautiful effect of the light or, as mentioned above, as a deliberate distortion for aesthetic purposes.



Figure 4. Nickel tailings #34 Sudbury, Ontario 1996 by Edward Burtynsky.

Addressing the challenges

Whatever approach a photographer adopts in terms of aesthetics, there remain challenges in reconciling subject matter and form when dealing with damaged landscapes. There are however ways that photographers can address these challenges and mitigate the risk of being accused of exploiting a situation that threatens humanity for the sake of beautiful imagery.

Hoskins (2013) made clear how complex and layered a landscape can be. When analysing human interaction with a landscape, it may be possible to discern human interactions dating back thousands of years. He refers to the appreciation of landscape as being like listening to great classical music. It is possible to appreciate the music to some extent without knowing anything about it but the more one understands, the greater the appreciation: 'Only when we know all the themes and harmonies can we begin to appreciate its full beauty, or to discover in it new subtleties every time we visit it' (Hoskins, 2013, p. 28). The development of landscape archaeology or landscape

history as an academic discipline in the twentieth century, which Hoskins helped to bring about, is significant for photographers as it established a new way of looking at landscapes.

Landscape photographers who are dealing with damaged landscapes are dealing with highly sensitive and political subject matters, which impact significantly on society. It is reasonable therefore for photographers to learn from the academic discipline of the social sciences. In order to develop any insights into a landscape or feel any connection with it, photographers need to understand it. And in order to understand it, photographers need to set aside time for background research and fieldwork. In reference to the work of certain photographers working on anthropological research, Becker wrote: 'By spending long periods of time among the people in the societies they studied, these photographers learned what was worth photographing, where the underlying rather than superficial drama was' (Becker, 1981, p. 11).

As well as understanding the landscape, photographers also need to have a clear vision of what it is they intend to communicate. As indicated above, various theorists have emphasized the importance of this. Becker (1978) discussed the nature of truth in photography, suggesting that the viewer needs ask what the photograph means and at the same time be wary of distortions. Adams (1996) referred to the importance of metaphor, or the wider significance of the image, as being crucial to the value of an image. Alexander emphasizes the importance of photographers having a 'vision for an image' (Alexander, 2015: p.185). Photographers who have a strong conceptual base for their work, underscored by a deep understanding of the subject matter, are less likely to be accused of exploiting damaged landscapes for the sake of beautiful or powerful images.

There are many photographers who conduct research to help them develop insights into a landscape. Simon Norfolk, for example, conducts extensive research on every aspect of his subject before he starts taking photographs. Other photographers conduct the research as an integral part of the project. In his work on Mount Kenya's vanishing glaciers, Norfolk worked with expert partners to map out exactly where the glaciers had been eighty years ago and at certain intervals up to the present day. Norfolk says about the research process: 'So, one kind of research is about information and partnerships – the other part is about technique and approach' (Read and Simmons, 2017, p. 172). For this project, in addition to all the background research, Norfolk spent three weeks taking just seven images. It took him four days simply to walk up the mountain. The images are carefully staged (a line of fire marks the boundary of where the glaciers used to reach) and the aesthetic is clearly influenced by the sublime, both in terms of the subject matter and in terms of the mood induced in the onlooker. The example provided below (figure 5) is both beautiful and meaningful. It communicates a disturbing truth in a compelling way about the retreat of the glaciers. Norfolk himself acknowledges that we cannot know for certain what has caused the retreat of the glaciers but confirms his belief that it is man-made: 'I believe that glaciers are retreating because of manmade global warming caused by the burning of hydro carbons...' (Read and Simmons, 2017, p. 173). There is an added layer of meaning embedded within the photograph as the line of fire has been created using petroleum. The line of fire therefore not only marks the boundary of where the glacier used to be but also acts as a metaphor for what is causing the retreat.



Figure 5. The melting away of the Lewis Glacier on Mt Kenya, 1934 glacier line, by Simon Norfolk 2015.

Conclusion

Landscape photographers who are working with damaged landscapes can adopt different approaches. They can for instance aim to downplay aesthetic considerations and adopt a deadpan, neutral style or alternatively they can embrace the aesthetic of the sublime, adapted for the modern age. Either way there are advantages and disadvantages and either approach, depending on the skill of the photographer, can work or not work.

Photographers who adopt a neutral style may well provide information that addresses an environmental issue without the distraction of an overly artistic style. However, the image may fail to engage the viewer through the lack of an emotional response. Furthermore, despite the neutral style and the bland or ugly subject matter, photographers may still create beautiful images, so there remains a potential disconnect between form and subject.

Where photographers embrace an aesthetic based on the sublime, they can attract the attention of the viewer and potentially engage their emotions, stimulating a sense of awe or fear that is appropriate for the subject matter. However, the beauty of the image may distract from the message and the viewer may recoil from finding something so damaged as beautiful. There is a risk that the message gets lost entirely and the photograph is simply seen as a beautiful image. There is no easy answer to this dilemma and each photographer negotiates their own way through these paradoxes. Photographers who draw on the aesthetic of the sublime when addressing environmental issues do risk being accused of exploiting the subject matter in the search for superficially beautiful and compelling images, especially if their images are viewed out of context.

Landscape photography in the modern age has a crucial role to play in documenting and explaining the damage being done to the environment and the catastrophic effects of man-made climate change. Photographers such as Edward Burtynsky and Simon Norfolk are helping to draw attention to and increase awareness of these issues. They draw on an aesthetic of the sublime, which has been adapted for the modern age. When the concept of the sublime was initially created, it was used by painters and later by photographers to create a sense of awe and fear in their viewers, in response to the sheer power of untamed nature. In the modern age photographers draw on this aesthetic to create a similar emotion in their viewers, but instead it is in response to the damage inflicted by humans on nature.

It is clear from the work of leading contemporary landscape photographers such as Simon Norfolk, that photographers who wish to communicate something that is true about damaged landscapes need an underpinning methodology and a clear rationale for their approach. It is through understanding the landscape, conducting research and spending time in the field, that photographers can develop an authentic visual language and communicate something that is true and compelling. A beautiful image can be both emotionally engaging and meaningful.

References

- Adams, R. (1996) *Beauty in Photography*, New York: Aperture
- Alexander, J.A.P. (2015) *Perspectives on Place*, London: Bloomsbury
- Bate, D. (2009) *Photography, the Key Concepts*, Oxford: Berg
- Becker, H. (1978). Do Photographs Tell the Truth? *Afterimage*, 5: 9-13
- Becker, H. (ed) (1981) *Exploring Society Photographically*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Becker, H. (1998) 'Visual Sociology, Documentary Photography and Photojournalism: It's (Almost) All a Matter of Context' in Prosser, J (ed) *Image-based Research*, Padstow: TJ International Ltd
- Burtynsky, E. (1982–2018). Edward Burtynsky [online]. Edward Burtynsky. Available from: <http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/> [Accessed 1st November 2018].
- Clarke, C. (1997) *The Photograph* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Diehl C. (2006). "The Toxic Sublime" (Edward Burtynsky) [online], Carol Diehl. Available from: <http://caroldiehl.com/node/4> [Accessed 1st November 2018].
- Hoskins, W.G (2013) *The Making of the English Landscape*, Toller Fratum: Little Toller Books
- Jackson, J.B (1984) *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, New Haven: Yale University Press
- Read, S., & Simmons, M. (2017) *Photographers and Research*, New York: Routledge
- Sontag, S (1979) *On Photography* London: Penguin
- Suchar, C. (1997) 'Grounding Visual Sociology Research in Shooting Scripts' *Qualitative Sociology* 20, 1: 33-55
- Wells, L. (2011) *Land Matters*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd

Image references

Figure 1. O'Sullivan, T. (1873). Ancient Ruins in the Canon De Chelle, New Mexico [photograph] Available from: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/45966> [Accessed 1st November 2018].

Figure 2. Fenton, R. (1860). The Terrace and Park at Harewood House [photograph] Available from: <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/photograph-of-the-terrace-and-grounds-of-harewood-house-news-photo/90761929> [Accessed 1st November 2018].

Figure 3. Adams, R. (1973) Mobile Homes Jefferson County Colorado [photograph] Available from: <https://cs.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=59084> [Accessed 1st November 2018].

Figure 4. Burtynsky, E. (1996). Nickel tailings #34 Sudbury, Ontario [photograph] Available from: <https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/photographs/tailings> [Accessed 1st November 2018].

Figure 5. Norfolk, S. (2015) The melting away of the Lewis Glacier on Mt Kenya, 1934 [photograph] Available from: <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/simon-norfolk-when-i-am-laid-in-earth-mapping-with-a-pyrograph#slideshow> [Accessed 24th December 2018]