



INTRODUCTION

Looking at the camera not only in still, but also in moving images, I question if anything framed by the camera could ever remain objective.

Since the 1970’s, artists working with photography have been questioning the possibilities of the medium as a democratic tool. In his work *Every building on the sunset strip*, Ed Ruscha mounted a camera on a pick-up truck and spent a day photographing every building on Sunset Boulevard, as he says, in the most democratic possible way, eschewing entirely any aspects of beauty, emotions and opinion and lacking a sense of personal style.

New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape, an exhibition curated by William Jenkins at the International Museum of Photography in 1975, marked a new era in landscape photography. The pictures, shown by 10 photographers, were taken in such manner that stripped them of any artistic frill and reduced the images to an essentially topographic state.

Lewis Baltz is one of the ten photographers belonging to the New Topographics movement. Since the 1970’s, the landscape of the American West has been an endless source of inspiration for Baltz in his photography. Nevada is a series of black and white images shot in the Nevada dessert in 1977. At first, the images appear to be an objective recording from reality. Baltz wants his work to look as everyday as possible, seeming as if anyone could do it and lacking a sense of personal style. The images are mute and distant, making the images appear as objective observations; of course, they are never objective and it is this that Baltz talks about in his work.

Where does objectivity stop and the role of the artist take over?The illusion of an objective image relies mainly in its aesthetic appearance. Not controlling what is photographed gives the illusion of a pure reality: but photography is never solely about what is seen in front of the camera, it is about the person standing behind the camera controlling what and how a certain reality is framed.

All forms of visual art have a great tradition in using landscape, but it

is since the invention and use of the camera that we question whether it is just the landscape we are looking at. I became interested in the idea of the landscape as a film set, a backdrop for a story. One of the greatest examples of this is, without any doubt, *Monument Valley*. We can hardly imagine this landscape without picturing John Wayne passing through on his horse. In our collective memory, this landscape has been transformed into a fictionalized space, an iconic landscape – a space that can only be seen within the context of a story and vice versa.The objectivity of the pure landscape is transformed into something subjective. But how does this transformation really occur?

LANDSCAPE AND THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY

We can all agree that the landscape of the American West has entered into the collective memory of western society by photography and film more than any other landscape on our planet. Living approximately 5000 miles away from America’s movie capital, Hollywood, and never having visited any other state besides New York, I can still picture a great road trip throughout almost the entire country without getting lost.

From the beginning of photographic history, landscape has been one of photography’s favourite subjects, and since American art history does not date as far back as, for instance, the history of painting in Europe, you could say that the American landscape has largely been visualised by photographic means. It is merely the camera, “the weapon of mass production”, that has documented this “great” American landscape, which has come to be the most iconic of photographic landscapes in western society. But, it is never the camera alone that documents, it’s also the person behind the camera, directing what is happing in this landscape.

JOHN FORD’S MONUMENT VALLEY

One of the great founders of using the American landscape as a backdrop is John Ford. *Stagecoach* (1939) was Ford’s

first of many Westerns to be shot in Monument Valley. Until this time, the valley itself had no historical meaning but Ford populated the space with men of Old West legends giving this landscape an entire new meaning. The imagery has taken up such a part of our collective memory that it became an iconic landscape. In *The Searchers* we are repeatedly told that Monument Valley is Texas. Ford uses this specific landscape to suggest another space, but whether the heroes and their horses, which Ford composes in his films, ever really existed in this exact landscape is no longer of any importance. The image exists in our memory and has therefore gained an immortal life of its own.

Ford’s choice for this exact environment is not just one of aesthetic means, but also because this specific landscape adds to the portrayal of the characters in his films. Ford’s landscape is a landscape of contrast, it’s romantic and sublime, and harsh and violent at the same time, but, above all, it’s vast and empty, lacking recognition of human civilization. Ford uses the landscape to symbolize loss, despair and isolation. The most iconic shots of *The Searchers* are probably the opening and ending. The first shot of Martha opening the front door frames the outer terrain like a photograph where within the deserted desert appears. In the last shot, this frame returns. Through the doorpost we see everyone entering the home, but Wayne barely enters before walking out again into the desert, the desert that reflects his own inner life. For his is a wild life, consumed by vendetta with nowhere to belong after the years of searching for the kidnapped daughter of his brother in the wilderness. Now, it’s the desert where he belongs.

WIM WENDERS AND THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

“When you travel a lot, and when you love to just wander around and get lost, you can end up in the strangest spots. I have a huge attraction to places. Already when I look at a map, the names of mountains, villages, rivers, lakes or landscape formations excite me, as long as I don’t know them and have never

been there... I seem to have sharpened my sense of place for things that are out of place. Everybody turns right, because that’s where it’s interesting: I turn left where there is nothing! And sure enough, I soon stand in front of my sort of place. I don’t know, it must be some sort of inbuilt radar that often directs me to places that are strangely quiet, or quietly strange.”

Wim Wenders

The use of landscape in German director Wim Wenders’ 1984 *Paris, Texas* consists of three parts, each part in a different environment. Part I: the desert where the main character is introduced. Part II: the city suburb, familiar environment on the LA hillside. Part III: the Houston brothel, where the protagonist confronts his past and seeks forgiveness. These three locations not only function as a backdrop for the physical journey of the protagonist, but the landscapes function as a metaphor for his characters and their inner state.

The film opens with the camera flying in over a Texas desert landscape. It’s a wide empty landscape with the sky as it’s only visual limitation. The landscape is dry and dusty with sand toned rocks and cliffs and mountains at the boarder covering the horizon. After some seconds, a figure is presented to the viewer. Walking in this immense landscape, the figure is merely a black dot crossing through. About 10 seconds later, the figure stops walking, the camera gets closer and you are first confronted with the identity of the character that goes by the name Travis Henderson. Travis is characterised with the same qualities that mark the desert. In this huge stretch of emptiness and nowhere to belong he wanders aimlessly and will not be able to leave the desert, just as John Wayne in *The Searchers*, until he can leave his trauma behind. The desert, lacking any confrontation with the demands of society is the place to reflect upon his sins.

Wenders once said: “Place is the driving force of my filmmaking, I want the place to tell the story instead of imposing a story on the place.” He often begins his films with a location. The narrative, which Wenders almost sees as an obstacle, comes afterward. Having said this, does the narrative really come later or does the location already have

enough narrative by itself? Going back to the opening scene of *Paris, Texas*, the viewer is confronted with the landscape as soon as the film begins. It’s not just any landscape, but a carefully chosen landscape. He chose to use an iconic landscape. In contrast to John Ford’s *The Searchers, Paris, Texas* is set in Texas and not in a space staged as Texas. Still, in both films, the location, whether true or false, is needed to express the narrative of the leading character. In *Paris, Texas* it’s not only Travis and his aimless and lost inner-state that is reflected in the desert landscape, but also the connection of this specific space with his later assumed, Mexican-American family background. He is just like the frontier, lost in between two borders.

BADLANDS

The first film to get me interested on the subject of landscape as a backdrop or character is Terence Malick’s 1973 film *Badlands*. Based on Bonnie and Clyde and the murder spree of Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, it tells the story of a young man, Kit (Martin Sheen) and teenage girl, Holly (Sissy Spacek) on the run in 1950’s America. Narrated by Holly, you are led trough their flight as Kit’s violent behaviour increases. Though violence takes up a big part of the story, the movie is set in the beautifully shot, stunning landscapes of Colorado. Malick uses the landscape as a contrast to their actions and, therefore, it emphasises Holly’s and Kit’s world. The landscapes are serene and honest, representing the good, whereas Holly’s and, above all, Kit’s behaviour is violent and uncontrolled and can be seen as the contrary, the bad.

In the second part of the film, Kit and Holly flee after staging a suicide by setting her father’s house on fire. They hide out in the woods, where they build a tree house and live in their own, separate world, free from the demands of society. Amongst the few things rescued from the house of Holly’s father is a romantic landscape painting. The landscape visualises two figures, one stretched out on the floor in between two Greek columns and the other standing bent over the first figure. The standing figure seems to be naked and

reminds you of an angel. In the background, all you see is an idyllic romantic landscape of water, great mountains and trees, which could be interpreted as heaven. The painting reflects the utopian world Holly and Kit try to create for themselves in the woods, and the use of the landscape throughout the entire film.

Like a romantic painting, the use of landscape has a tendency to describe an emotional state of being. In romantic painting, it expresses the emotional state of the artist as a reaction to the industrial revolution; in Malick’s films, it reflects the emotional state of the characters and their reaction to their environments and society. Ron Mottram states in his essay All things shining: The Struggle for Wholeness, Redemption and Transcendence in the Films of Terrance Malick, that: “The emptiness of the characters lives, their emotionless to death and violence, their overall detachment from event, and the casual indifference with which they face the future are matched by their physical surroundings.” The general emptiness of the towns, the expansive barren landscapes through which they travel and the vacant roads, as if existing only for their use, act as metaphors for separation and for the absence of any structure for the nurturing or any sustaining of a human community and its individual members. It’s here, in this general emptiness and barren landscape, that they can create their own world, where they can be whoever they want to be without any demands of society.

What these spaces all have in common is their vastness and emptiness. They are long stretches of land without any recognition of human civilization. They are spaces where you can isolate yourself from any demands of society in search of wholeness and meaning. And, it is exactly this, that Ford’s, Wender’s and Malick’s protagonists all have in common. They are on a journey not only literally through the landscape, but also within themselves, where their travels can almost be seen as a pilgrimage, and the landscape as a symbol referring to their inner states. John Wayne in *The Searchers* can be depicted as wild and empty, Travis is lost and aimless, and in *Badlands*, the landscape is functioning as a metaphor for Holly’s and Kit’s alienation and separation from society.

THE GREAT QUEST

In the 1969 film *Easy Rider* by Dennis Hopper, two bikers, Wyatt and Billy, are followed on a trip from Los Angeles to New Orleans. Wyatt — also known as captain America — and Billy are on a quest for total freedom. The film questions the reality of 1960’s America and concentrates on social themes of repression and freedom. The beautifully shot landscapes act, just as in *Badlands*, in contrast with — and thereby emphasizing — the ugliness of their bigoted inhabitants. One of the Easy Rider reviews at the time said: “The search undertaken by Captain America and his sidekick Billy is not geographical, it is literally a quest to find out where America’s head is at. The people and places represented in that quest are evocative of different states of consciousness, co-existing unpeacefully in this country and all over the world. Each stop on the road is an encounter with a different awareness of what is real and what is of value.”

Now, going back to my main question: in our collective memory the landscape has been transformed into a fictionalised space, an iconic landscape — a space that can only be seen within the context of a story and vice versa. The objectivity of the pure landscape is transformed into something subjective. But how does this transformation really occur? I can say that the four examples shown above do describe the phenomena of transformation, but how do these examples explain the transformation occurring in the landscape?

First of all, it is clear that the transformation is one applied by a specific person, the director, the man with the camera, and that this specific person is not just using the landscape as a backdrop, but to express something else. The landscape functions as a metaphor for the inner state of the character. Whether it is reflecting the character’s inner state or is being used as a contrast to emphasise the character’s state, the landscape becomes an allegorical landscape, a landscape that can not only be interpreted literally but, more likely, one that is referring to something else. The landscape symbolizes the subconscious, the lost soul in search of wholeness and

meaning.

Because the USA doesn’t have a long history in art, the camera and the stories told by it have become the main creators of the American landscape. The director uses the landscape in an allegorical sense to tell his stories: thus, the landscape has gone from being a pure and objective stretch of nature to a space that has been subjectified by the camera. In that sense you could say that the landscape gained a new meaning, a new reality that is only to be seen within the context of fiction. Everything framed by the camera is a collection of choices, choices that are not made by the camera, but by who is controlling it. Ed Ruscha mounted a camera on a truck photographing every building on sunset strip. By not looking through the lens at the time the image is recorded the images might appear as democratic, but it’s all the decisions that come before, and even after the shutter clicks that add up to a subjective representation of a certain reality. The landscapes used as backdrops for fictional stories where carefully chosen by the directors and framing them in such way that make them undeniable as just a backdrop of nature, but as a predetermined reference to something else. As soon as something is framed, a story is told and objectivity is history. To quote photographer Garry Winogrand:

“When you put four edges around a set of facts, you change those facts.”