New Topographies and Generic Transformation in Landscape Photography of the 1970s

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NEW TOPOGRAPHICS AND GENERIC TRANSFORMATION
IN LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY OF THE 1970S

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ABSTRACT

The 1975 exhibition New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape, at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York aimed to redefine the genre of landscape in photography. Curator William Jenkins asserted that the photographs in the show were characterized by documentary style, objective description, and status as document. The characteristics Jenkins identified in new landscape photography were first brought to the public’s attention by Nathan Lyons’ 1966 exhibition Toward a Social Landscape at Eastman House and John Szarkowski’s 1967 exhibition New Documents at the Museum of Modern Art.

I argue that Jenkins’ conception of new landscape photography took part in a growing trend in the 1970s of the theory and criticism of established genres in literature and film. The demythologization of the landscape genre in New Topographics mirrors what film theorist and critic John G. Cawelti described in his 1977 article, “Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films,” as the demythologization of the genre’s founding myth.
INTRODUCTION

In 1975 in Rochester, New York, the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film (GEH or Eastman House) mounted a new exhibition that startlingly redefined the genre of contemporary American western landscape photography. *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* featured nine photographers whose work engaged with the built environment and landscape of the contemporary American West: Joe Deal, Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, Stephen Shore, John Schott, and Henry Wessel, Jr. (Nixon, Shore, and German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher proved the exceptions to this rule as their work concerned the east coast).\(^1\) In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, curator William Jenkins outlines three defining characteristics of the photographs in the show: a minimal style or aesthetic; the objective description of a scene; and the status of the photograph as document.

These characteristics are not new to the history of photography. The modernist pictures of Edward Weston can be termed minimal (though not Minimalist); the objective description of a scene had been a critical goal of certain documentary photographers during the 1930s; and discussions of the photograph as document date back to nineteenth-century American landscape photography, much of which was intended to serve as evidence of western expansion, the promotion of tourism, and other purposes.\(^2\) Aggregated together, however, and applied to landscapes devoid of humans save for the indexical proof of their present existence, these three characteristics collectively take on a new conceptual significance.

Jenkins’ reconsideration of contemporary documentary photography grew out of two preceding American exhibitions, Nathan Lyons’ 1966 show *Toward a Social Landscape* at Eastman House and John Szarkowski’s 1967 *New Documents* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Lyons articulated the need to expand our definition of landscape photography to

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\(^1\) While the work of these photographers does not concern the American West, I believe that Jenkins included them to further his point about documentary style, and to emphasize the objective and impartial connotations of the term “documentary.” When balanced with the (lay or educated) viewer’s historical consciousness concerning what I explain as the traditional Western landscape under “Statement of the Problem,” I do not see this lack of geographical unity as a threat to my main argument. For a more detailed explanation, see the third chapter of this thesis.

\(^2\) Of course, if we want to split hairs, the photograph entered into use as a document of record almost immediately after its invention. For example, look to William Henry Fox Talbot’s photographed collections of glassware and Anna Atkins’ surveys of plant life. All serve as evidentiary record.
include such social spaces as the built environment, or “man-made landscape,” and the networks among people.³ Szarkowski’s concept of the new document, by contrast, seems primarily concerned with the practice of “documenting” life, though he is careful to steer away from associations with the “social documentary” photography of the 1930s, which sought reform.⁴ Both Lyons and Szarkowski emphasized the snapshot as essential to the practice of contemporary photography, and both included examples by Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand in their exhibitions. Given his interest in landscape photography, Jenkins rejected the snapshot aesthetic of his immediate predecessors in favor of tripod photography.⁵

Considerations of how the American landscape has been altered by recent cultures erupted simultaneously in various academic disciplines beginning in the late 1960s and culminating in the 1976 bicentennial. Entire issues of *Art in America* and *Artforum* were dedicated to explorations of landscape (1975); Robert Venturi’s *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972, rev. ed. 1977), a milestone in postmodern studies, examined the vernacular architecture and urban planning of Las Vegas; landscape design writer and theorist J. B. Jackson spearheaded the development of the field of cultural landscape studies with his works *Landscapes* (1970) and *American Spaces* (1972); and theoretical geographer Yi-Fu Tuan published *Space and Place* (1977).

While the photographers in *New Topographics* surely engaged with the various discourses addressing landscape, I argue that Jenkins’ exhibition was an exercise in genre criticism, specifically the kind practiced during the 1970s to identify the collapse of certain established American genres in literary and film studies. Film historian and critic John G. Cawelti provides one of the most sustained examples of such criticism. In 1971 he published *The

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³ Nathan Lyons, *Toward a Social Landscape* (Rochester, NY: George Eastman House of Photography, 1966). Note: Eastman House has changed its name many times over the decades. Publishers listed reflect what is printed inside the original text.


⁵ Jenkins also organized a curious, small exhibition of six photographers in 1975 titled *The Extended Document: An Investigation of Information and Evidence in Photographs*. Rather than engage the function and role of the document like his colleagues, Jenkins interrogated the ways in which photographs lie to us. Based on the rather tired question of optical veracity in photography and its relationship to reality, the curator highlights work that engages in a mostly humorous wink-and-nod conversation with the viewer, prodding him to whether as to whether and to what degree the photographer is lying to him. The result is rather enjoyable if not particularly thought provoking. It is interesting that in the *New Topographies* catalogue, Jenkins assumes the photographer to be completely truthful. William Jenkins, *The Extended Document* (Rochester, NY: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975).
Six-Gun Mystique, an analysis of the film genre of the western. The year 1976 saw the publication of Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture. He furthers this study of genre in the 1977 article, “Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films.”

Rather than performing a Caweltian reading of New Topographics, I utilize Cawelti’s theories in order to put in relief Jenkins’ transformation of the genre. First off, let me note a key difference between the use of genre in film and genre in photography: dependence upon narrative. Film depends upon a narrative or lack thereof to give structure to genre, whereas photography often does not. However, Walter Benjamin writes in his “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” that narrative in film is essentially the internalization of photographic captions. In this exhibition, Jenkins’ textual narrative sits atop the organization of images into series.6 My study of New Topographics concerns what Cawelti outlines as the four key modes of transformation of film genres: humorous burlesque, evocation of nostalgia, demythologization of generic myth and the affirmation of myth as myth. According to Cawelti, the genre must transform when its founding myth no longer satisfies the needs of contemporary society.7

I argue that in its focus on documentary style and its isolation of the landscape, Jenkins’ text goes against the traditional discourses on landscape photography of the western United States. His text contradicts traditional romanticization and monumentalization of the West in order to reveal a subversion of the genre’s founding myths and provide a conceptual redefinition. While much recent scholarship has focused on placing each of the individual photographers in the context of a particular strain of 1970s culture—vernacular architecture, film, land art, real estate photography, environmentalism, etc.—not much has focused on New Topographics, the exhibition, as a key conceptual break in the narrative of the history of photography. It is vital to look back diachronically, and not just synchronically, in understanding the exhibition’s historical importance. In this thesis I aim to narrow my focus on the exhibition as representing a conceptual strategy to negotiate between the historical precedents with which the curator and


photographers were obviously and admittedly engaged—a practice of genre transformation and redefinition.

**Statement of the Problem**

*New Topographics* problematizes the landscape genre because none of the images in the exhibition fit into either of the two major models of American western landscape photography as the scholarship has defined them. In 1975, that means either the twentieth-century modernist landscapes of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, or the nineteenth-century survey photographs of Timothy O’Sullivan and Carleton Watkins. The most exhibited and canonical works of both trends, such as Adams’ *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico* of 1941 and O’Sullivan’s *Canyon de Chelly, Arizona, 1873*, traded on traditional conventions of glorifying the western landscape, such as concepts of the sublime and the picturesque. Although O’Sullivan’s work has since become known for its complex negotiation of aesthetics and documentary utility, he entered the canon of photographic history as a modernist master through the advocacy of first MoMA photography curator Beaumont Newhall and photographer Ansel Adams.

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8 The sublime and the picturesque are specifically drawn from the tradition of landscape painting in Europe and America from about 1830 to 1865. Barbara Novak’s October 1975 article in *Artforum* “Landscape Permutated: From Painting to Photography,” directly compares nineteenth-century survey photography to landscape painting, finding correlations among formal characteristics as well as the tacit influence of nineteenth-century religiosity in the form of Swedenborgianism and Transcendental literature. She uses the exhibition *Era of Exploration* as a jumping-off point for this entire discussion.

For my own discussion of landscape, I plan to hew closely to a traditional definition, since this is what I plan to show as transformed. While the nineteenth-century survey photographers often photographed mining towns, railroad work, or Native Americans, my focus is not on what existed at what time, but rather how images were discussed in the burgeoning field of the history of photography at the Museum of Modern Art and at the Eastman House. Within the literature previous to New Topographics, these images do not generally count as “landscapes.”

I have also decided to leave out any real discussion of the Pictorialists or the landscape photographers of the 1950s and 1960s (the generation just after Ansel Adams and Edward Weston), such as Paul Caponigro, Harry Callahan, and Art Sinsabaugh because this thesis is not intended as a survey. The work of the latter group is so similar to f/64, and also shares commonalities with *New Topographics*, that it does not truly fit my theme of rupture and transformation.


10 In 1966, Newhall mounted the exhibition *T. H. O’Sullivan: Photographer* at Eastman House. Adams wrote in the preface about the quality of O’Sullivan’s survey images: “I was weary of mere ‘record’ photographs; while the subject matter might command interest the treatment was usually quite sterile and the quality poor. The O’Sullivan photographs opened wide a new world for me. Here were perceptive images, well-composed, of high technical quality, and definitely suggesting a creative personality. The single-weight albumen prints were neatly mounted on horizontal album cards and the effort as a whole revealed excellent craftsmanship and respect for the medium.” Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, *T. H. O’Sullivan: Photographer* (Rochester: George Eastman House, 1966), 5.
Instead, Jenkins writes at the end of the *New Topographies* catalogue essay that his goal is “simply to postulate, at least for the time being, what it means to make a documentary photograph.” That is, he seeks to define what it means to make a documentary photograph in 1975, rather than 1935. The precedent for what makes a documentary photograph up until this point has been defined by the work of the social documentarians of the 1930s—Walker Evans, Margaret Bourke-White, and Dorothea Lange. One can argue for much of nineteenth-century survey work as serving a documentary function, but for the most part those campaigns had such nebulous goals and methods that the term documentary photography is more closely aligned with 1930s photography than with the nineteenth-century work. Jenkins has, in fact, changed the terms of the debate on western landscape photography. Relying on his knowledge of Szarkowski’s new document and Lyons’ expanded landscape, Jenkins turned the conversation to the contemporary, built landscape and in so doing revealed the inadequacy of the founding myth of the West, namely its inability to sustain contemporary landscape photography. For Jenkins, the traditional tropes of the picturesque and the sublime, as well as any undertones of westward expansion or manifest destiny, have become kitsch—the stuff of Sierra Club calendars. And so he has mobilized the images in *New Topographies* in such a way as to purge these conventions from the discourse of contemporary landscape photography. Rosalind Krauss will later openly criticize the modernist appropriation of O’Sullivan’s work and suppression of his “scientific,” government-financed survey projects. Perhaps it is Jenkins’ reconsideration of the landscape that paves the way for the reevaluation in the 1980s and 1990s of the more “documentary” survey photographs, the images of railroad tracks, mining camps, and other collections produced during this time period.

**State of the Literature**

It is only within the last five years that scholars have attempted to engage this exhibition in any substantial dialogue. Three key texts currently stand out as especially important: the 2009 catalogue from Britt Salvesen’s restaging of *New Topographies*, a 2008 anthology of essays entitled *Reframing the New Topographies*, and Jennifer Roger’s 2007 master’s thesis. The first is an endless resource of background information with over 80 pages of text in addition to full-page

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plates of the images and a reproduction of the original 1975 catalogue. Salvesen’s essay in the updated *New Topographics* catalogue expands and deepens Jenkins’ assertions, while providing extensive context for the formation of the exhibition as well as background on the artists. Salvesen also goes on to highlight selected influential figures such as documentarian Walker Evans, artist Ed Ruscha, and the nineteenth-century American landscape photographers. However, she makes no comment on the exhibition’s relation to the genre of landscape, save to mention the influence of Timothy O’Sullivan, and the photographers’ collective desire to distance themselves from the modernist masters of landscape.

The second publication, *Reframing the New Topographics*, was the result of a panel at the 2008 annual meeting of the College Art Association, published by the Center for American Places at Columbia College. This book further contextualizes the exhibition within the realms of art and film in the 1970s, reflecting a plurality of influences and applications evident in the exhibition itself. The book in fact moves away from Jenkins’ reliance on documentary photography and the “new document.” Toby Jurovics and Mark Rawlinson's essays for this anthology counter Jenkins’ contention that the photographs are unsentimental and nonjudgmental. For example, the text in Robert Adams' photobooks can be precious and often quite sentimental about the landscape. Finis Dunaway analyzes Adams' engagement of landscape via the burgeoning environmentalism of the 1970s, focusing on the concept of “ecological citizenship” and the influence of urban sprawl and American car culture on the landscape. Greg Foster-Rice discusses the exhibition in terms of systems theory, that is, the reconsideration of the art object as no longer autonomous but integrated with and inseparable from society. Dovetailing nicely with Foster-Rice's discussion of systems theory, Kim Sichel takes on the “topographic” with a discussion of mapping and aerial photography. In short, this anthology provides a broad range of critical interpretations, moving beyond Jenkins' original thesis, which simply announces *New Topographics* as the new documentary landscape photography.

The third key text in the literature on *New Topographics* is a master’s thesis in the area of library sciences and photographic preservation. Jennifer Roger compiled an extensive annotated bibliography for two exhibitions: *New Topographics* and Naef’s *Era of Exploration*. Roger provides detailed lists and descriptions of all documents in the archive at Eastman House as well as most related scholarship on the exhibition itself and the included photographers. She does the

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12 Jenkins did not reference the majority of this information in the catalogue essay.
same for *Era of Exploration*. Roger’s work is a valuable resource for researchers who cannot visit Rochester.

Other mentions of *New Topographics* and its photographers are few and often tangential. Wendy Cheng’s review of the 2009 restaging essentially rehashes Salvesen’s catalogue essay, while British photo historian Liz Wells includes a section on western American landscape photography in her 2011 book, *Land Matters*. This lack of scholarship is not surprising considering that *New Topographics* did not form a movement, per se, in photography, and was not originally well received.

Most of these photographers continued to exhibit their work, but only occasionally together. Several participated in John Szarkowski’s later exhibitions at the MoMA, *Mirrors and Windows* (1978) and *American Landscapes* (1981). However, neither of Szarkowski’s catalogue essays mentions these photographers or *New Topographics*. Similarly, many of these photographers participated in the 1999 exhibition at the Nevada Museum of Art, *The Altered Landscape*. In the introduction to the catalogue, editor Peter E. Poole acknowledges *New Topographics* as an important precedent for and influence on this exhibition. This show takes a decidedly environmentalist bent, engaging ideas of beauty and spirituality in the landscape, and fidelity to reality in photographs of the landscape.


Cawelti’s use of the term “generic transformation” stems from the literary genre theory of the 1970s. The term acquires sustained interest in literature and film theory through the 1980s, when genre criticism waned. While the study and codification of genre has a long history in literature, it seems that Franco-Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov introduced the concept of transformation in genre sometime in the early 1970s. Most notable are his book *The Fantastic* (1973), his article “The Origin of Genre,” (1976), and the book *Genres in Discourse*, which was
not available in English until 1990. In order to ground Cawelti within the discourse of genre criticism, I compare and contrast his theories with those of his contemporaries Todorov, Jacques Derrida, and Scottish literary scholar Alistair Fowler.

Précis of Chapters

My first chapter will address some of the problems raised by New Topographics. Jenkins has admitted that he and Joe Deal, a photographer and exhibition designer at Eastman House, assembled the show in a matter of months, using photographers that they both knew personally or had worked with previously. Jenkins has often responded with this fact to critics who deem the show sloppy and not thoroughly researched. This criticism generally concerns the inclusion of the Bechers, whose work is categorically different from the others and who are not American, as well as the exclusion of Ed Ruscha. Though Jenkins has since lamented excluding Ruscha, in the catalogue essay he makes it quite clear that while Ruscha’s Twentysix gasoline stations (1963) was “about” art, Schott’s images were actually documentary in some way, and thus were “of,” rather than “about” the things he photographed. Compare Twentysix Gasoline Stations with John Schott’s Untitled, Route 66 Motels of 1973. Thus he draws a distinction between the photograph as document and the use of a documentary style. Jenkins also uses the term “minimal” to describe this style, but stays away from aligning the photographers with Minimalism proper. In foregrounding style, he basically makes a case for the images in New Topographics being “about” photography, rather than “of” their specific views. This privileging of style is also curious considering the amount of information on geography, topography, and cultural landscape studies in the New Topographics file used by Jenkins at Eastman House; this information did not make it into the final essay. These holes in Jenkins’ argument reveal his uncertainty in how to contextualize these photographs. Rather than align them with the obvious choices—Watkins, O’Sullivan, Adams, or even aerial photography and the earthworks beginning in the 1970s—he chooses the “new document” as his model. By almost entirely skirting the issue of “landscape” in his essay, Jenkins paves the way for a redefinition of the genre as not trapped within the old mythology. Perhaps by examining the flaws in the exhibition, I can attempt to resolve some of them and to further refine Jenkins’ original argument.

My second chapter will detail Cawelti’s theories on genre and its transformation in relation to genre criticism practiced by some prominent contemporary literary theorists. In his
book *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, Cawelti defines a genre or formula as a combination of “cultural mythology” with an “archetypal story pattern.” For my purposes, the cultural mythology underlying these photographs is the mythic literature on the American west while the archetypal story pattern or overarching structure corresponds to artistic conventions of the landscape genre. In “*Chinatown*” Cawelti detailed what he considered the current four modes of generic transformation in film: humorous burlesque, evocation of nostalgia, demythologization of generic myth, and the affirmation of myth as myth. He cites as examples, respectively, *Blazing Saddles* (1974), *True Grit* (1969), *Chinatown* (1974), and *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Cawelti holds that genres “tend to exhaust themselves,” when they can no longer keep pace with contemporary society. Alistair Fowler breaks down the transformation of genre even more minutely, describing eight different methods: topical invention, combination, aggregation, change of scale, change of function, counterstatement, inclusion, and generic mixture. He takes a syntactical approach as opposed to Cawelti’s thematic approach. Perhaps it is the film historian’s interest in popular culture that prompts his reflections on society’s needs rather than a purely analytical approach.

Todorov’s conception of the transformation of genre is much less dramatic. In “The Origins of Genre,” he writes essentially that genres do not break or fail, rather they simply transform into new or altered genres. In this way Todorov frames the transformation of genre less as a decisive break than as a necessary modification. As generic transformation reflects a transgression against current institutional rules, so does the transformation itself become codified through the same or a similar institution. In this chapter I also compare the work of Cawelti and Todorov to that of Derrida regarding the rules that structure genre, how it is transformed, and what are the consequences of such transformation.

In my third chapter, I will relate Cawelti’s theory to what I see as Jenkins’ revelation of generic transformation in the landscape. With *New Topographics*, Jenkins separates the “cultural

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14 I realize these are mostly westerns. Though the article focuses on other genres, these were his best examples. I suppose it fits nicely with my project. Cawelti, “*Chinatown*,” 510.


mythology” from the “archetypal story pattern.” He subtitles the show Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape, but in the catalogue essay retreats from landscape as subject, instead focusing on the exhibition as what he called “a stylistic event.” Jenkins divorces aesthetics from content in order to focus on his conception of the documentary style, which he qualifies as minimal. Description he claims as the topographic element, something approximating a scientific endeavor. Then, the status of photograph as document further cements this emphasis on the documentary style. In taking the focus off the landscape itself and focusing on documentary style, Jenkins subverts the traditional conventions advocated by Adams and Newhall. Rather than renewing the west as a continual pristine wilderness, Jenkins gives us what he would have us believe is a clear lens through which to see (rather than “view,” per Krauss) the collapse of this myth. In this chapter I will locate photographic examples in New Topographics of each of Cawelti’s four modes of generic transformation. For example, John Schott’s Ruscha-esque series of faux-adobe Indian motels on Route 66 reflects a humorous response to the documentary survey while Robert Adams’ work clearly demythologizes the beautiful, sublime West with his foregrounding of crumbling mobile homes and tacky tract houses in the expansive landscape.

Interestingly enough, an exhibition of nineteenth-century survey photography ran at the same time as, and relatively close by, Eastman House. Era of Exploration: the Rise of Landscape Photography in the West at the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, New York, was curated by then-Metropolitan photography curator Weston Naef, and centered on Carleton Watkins’ images of Yosemite and O’Sullivan’s government surveys. Contrary to Jenkins’ goal, the catalogue essays reinforced the Adams-Newhall emphasis on modernist formalism and the artist-as-genius while providing extensive historical context. Thus this show provides a convenient foil for New Topographies as it suppressed the very documentary qualities which Jenkins chose to foreground—after all, most survey photography was supposed, to some degree, to “document” and inform eastern Americans about the unexplored West.

17 Jenkins’ association of documentary with science is what makes me think he had a part in spurring the later “rediscovery” of the nineteenth-century survey images that were not sublime and picturesque.
18 Weston Naef has become the preeminent scholar on Carleton Watkins since this exhibition and continues to publish numerous books on Watkins through his association with the Getty Museum.
Today the New Topographies exhibition occupies an exalted status in the pantheon of landscape photography. However, the story of its initial reception is far from glamorous. Upon its opening in 1975, critics lambasted the show, labeling it incoherent, boring, and narrow-sighted. Admittedly, curator William Jenkins and Eastman House exhibition designer Joe Deal assembled the show in a matter of months, using photographers they both knew personally or had worked with previously. However, the lack of preparation by no means explains the conceptual problems inherent in Jenkins’ thesis. In this chapter I assess the objections advanced in three contemporary critical reviews of New Topographies. What follows focuses on Charles Demarais’s review in *Afterimage* as his critique is the most pointed and sustained. To a lesser extent, my discussion engages with Carter Ratcliff’s review in *Art in America*, and Robert Woolard’s article in *Artweek*. These authors express three major issues with the exhibition: the photographers are *not* neutral, the images are *not* topographical, and the show is *not* unified. Through this exercise I hope to illustrate some of the problematic aspects of Jenkins’ original thesis and determine whether or not these might be resolved.

I suggest Jenkins’ major contribution to this exhibition is his deft negotiation between two poles of historical photography: documentary and the landscape. Carter Ratcliff reaches this conclusion in his 1976 article “Route 66 Revisited: The New Landscape Photography.” He writes, “Yet it must be admitted that the richness of this group derives in part from a tension between the esthetic revelations made by the style of each, and what we already know about their referents.” Each genre brings to the table a host of historical associations, which must be considered. For documentary, this includes primarily Walker Evans and the WPA FSA photography of the 1930s, as well as John Szarkowski’s and Nathan Lyons’ recent curatorial forays into the contemporary photographic document with the work of Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, and others. For landscape, a balanced consideration includes the commercial and government-funded western land surveys of the nineteenth century as well as the twentieth-

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19 Carter Ratcliff, 90.
century modernist landscapes of Group f/64—Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and others. Perhaps for the sake of thoroughness, Jenkins would have even delved into the massive amount of literature regarding the subject of nineteenth-century American landscape painting. Ultimately Jenkins refused to engage with these historical discourses. Such emphasis on the historical western landscape would have imbued the exhibition with a historicism that I expect Jenkins was keen to avoid.\textsuperscript{20} This choice would have also introduced a wealth of contextual information that Jenkins sought to suppress as outside his focus on style.

As I explained in previous chapters of this study, Jenkins’ exhibition serves predominantly to highlight the changes wrought within the genre of landscape by contemporary photographers. The crux of this project is my attempt to invalidate the fundamental myths that undergird the show’s direct historical antecedents. In order to keep the exhibition’s central focus on contemporary photography, the curator instead chose to suppress the “landscape” aspect of his show in favor of the more superficial unifier of style. It is in this way that he prompts us to reconsider the landscape in terms of a documentary aesthetic.

Unfortunately, Jenkins’ choice to foreground the issue of documentary objectivity necessitated the inclusion of certain thematic outliers, which created the disunity noted by critics.\textsuperscript{21} These outliers served to bolster his claims to a “scientific” point of view on the part of the photographers. He exerts unnecessary effort in trying to convince the reader of the artists’ objectivity and neutrality, yet it is clear to viewers that most of the photographers do, in fact, make a judgment or statement of some kind in their work. Indeed, Ratcliff writes that “If documentation requires neutrality, then none of these photographers produces documents. The point throughout is in the contrast between the high quality of their styles and the often not very high quality of the possibilities of human existence in the spaces they depict.”\textsuperscript{22} This consideration required that Jenkins overcompensate by conflating “documentary” with

\textsuperscript{20} Jenkins ultimately decided that it was too tenuous to trace a similar aesthetic or style all the way from the nineteenth century to the young generation of \textit{New Topographics}. Salvesen, 38.

\textsuperscript{21} I admit that for the central argument of my thesis to be airtight, that is, the part concerning specifically the photography of the American West, I would prefer that these outliers did not exist. However, these exceptions are to be expected when writing about an exhibition as diverse as \textit{New Topographics}. And, the scholarship has generalized the content of the show in such a way that \textit{New Topographics} today is understood as photography of the West.

\textsuperscript{22} Ratcliff, 90.
“scientific,” because it is the only way he could sell “objectivity.” Ultimately, it is precisely the inclusion of these outliers that allowed Jenkins’ claims to scientific objectivity to hold water.23

While all the work in the show can be considered to fall under the rubric of “the document” as a photographic conceit elucidated by Szarkowski and Lyons,24 much of the work hews too closely to the romanticism of earlier generations, threatening to turn New Topographics into a “landscape” show.25 In order to bring the focus back to documentary style, Jenkins included husband-and-wife team Bernd and Hilla Becher as the standard-bearers of “science,” and serialist John Schott (as almost-proxy for Ed Ruscha) as waving the stylistic flag. Cooling Towers—Concrete, from 1967 to 1973, well represents the Becher’s modus operandi for their typologies. Truly, the show is easily divisible into thematic sections, each serving a different purpose: Baltz, Adams, and Wessel represent the academic tradition detailed in the previous chapter; Shore, Schott, and Gohlke support Jenkins’ promotion of the deadpan aesthetic; and the Bechers, Nixon, and Deal hold up the Jenkins’ allusions to the scientific method.

The problems with Jenkins’ thesis—the absolute focus on style, disunity among the images, rejection of photographic history, and latent interest in landscape—reflect what Fredric Jameson has identified as key characteristics of postmodern art: depthlessness, fragmentation, historicism, and spatialization.26 Jenkins’ strategy is to combine more traditional works that concern themselves with questions of beauty and honesty (Adams), with works that focus more closely on science in the form of aerial photography (Nixon), which clearly invokes cartography and topography, or archival classification and typology (the Bechers). In turn, each grouping appears to legitimize the other. His contention that all the works reflect a documentary aesthetic then serves as a superficial unifier for the show. While many of the images themselves may

23 For this reason, I have restricted my discussion in the previous two chapters to a certain segment of the exhibition: those working in the West.

24 In addition to New Documents and Toward a Social Landscape, Lyons’ 1967 exhibition The Persistence of Vision questions the relation of the photograph to visual reality, an issue central to the concept of the “document,” that it is somehow “true” and “real,” in the sense that it has some valid claim on what we see. Jenkins’ 1975 exhibition The Extended Document seems a natural bridge between the document and New Topographies. This smaller show displayed similar work as The Persistence of Vision, that is, works that were not “straight” photographs, but rather involved photomontage, collage, and other nontraditional methods. However, Jenkins made the case in his catalogue essay that these images could also ascribe to the “document” label as they still represented a part of reality. See Nathan Lyons, The Persistence of Vision (New York: Horizon Press, 1967), 6, and William Jenkins, The Extended Document (Rochester: George Eastman House, 1975), 1-3.

25 Here I mean the work of those mentioned above.

actually seem rather modernist and traditional, Jenkins’ approach can be seen as an appropriately postmodern one to the exhibition of an evolving photographic discourse. In attempting to make sense of a new trend, he fits these photographs into a genre discourse already in progress: the document. In the process, it seems that he wound up redefining a different genre: landscape. Perhaps if he would have abandoned his insistence on scientific objectivity, he could have acknowledged the show for what it really was—a survey.

Let us now examine the greatest complaints lobbed against Jenkins’ curatorial practice by critics. Charles Demarais is Jenkins’ harshest detractor, going so far as to say in “Topographical error” that the exhibition provided “a curatorial exegesis of what is seen as an important contemporary direction, however, the show falls flat on its face.” He seems mystified at the Schott’s inclusion, writing that his work is not remotely “non-judgmental,” and that it is “antithetical” to Jenkins’ thesis. While Schott certainly does criticize the kitschy appropriation of native vernacular architecture for commercial tourism, I believe the reviewer misses Jenkins’ objective in using Schott. Indeed, it is surprising that Demarais does not also condemn the catalogue’s emphasis on Ruscha’s influence. The exclusion of Ruscha and Schott raises many questions about Jenkins’ thought process, especially since the curator so belabored the artist’s importance in the New Topographics catalogue essay. I believe that Ruscha formed the ultimate stylistic source for the exhibition, and Schott is essentially the representative of this deadpan aesthetic. He conforms to the general template: the frontal viewpoint, square framing, continuous series, and vernacular architecture.

Though the curator has since lamented excluding Ruscha from the exhibition, in the original catalogue essay Jenkins makes it quite clear that he considered Ruscha’s work generally to be conceptual art, while he considered John Schott’s work to be documentary. Jenkins argues that Twentysix Gasoline Stations was “about” art and a set of aesthetic issues, rather than pictures “of” the gasoline stations themselves. Schott’s images, on the other hand, were “of,” rather than “about” the things he photographed. It is telling that Schott’s images were taken from a relatively close vantage point, focusing in on the specific building, while Ruscha’s images were taken while driving down the street and so include part of that street. This difference lets us

28 Salvesen, 27.
29 Jenkins, 5.
know that Schott interest is in the individual buildings and photographs while Ruscha is concerned with the project as a whole. This distinction forms the basis of Jenkins’ conditions for the formation of a document. He writes in the exhibition catalogue “It is this coincidence—the making of a photograph that is primarily about what is in front of the lens—that is the central factor in the making of the document.” Therefore, a document must also be “about” what it is “of.”30 As John Schott put it, Ruscha’s images “are not statements about the world through art, but statements about art through the world.”31

In light of this conceptual framework, we are led to ask why else might Jenkins have excluded Ruscha. The most obvious response would be one of chronological distance. Jenkins and the show’s photographers mostly appreciated Ruscha’s early photobooks, those produced during the mid- to late-1960s. These include Twenty-six Gasoline Stations (1962), Every Building on the Sunset Strip (1966), Thirty-four Parking Lots (1967), and Real Estate Opportunities (1970). In her contribution to the 2009 anthology Reframing the New Topographics, Britt Salvesen writes about the wide interest in real-estate photography among the New Topographics photographers.32 It is possible that including Ed Ruscha would have tipped the show too far in a direction toward real estate and too far back into the 1960s. This way Jenkins could avoid historicism by keeping the show as “current” as possible, and therefore he included only works produced in the period from 1971 through 1975. Including more of the sort of photography by artists such as Dan Graham or Hans Haacke33 would have also introduced a more prominent narrative of consumerism and ownership, which might detract from Jenkins’ central message of objective documentary style. Both Graham and Haacke became involved in site-specific and land art at this time, an association that would have inevitably turned the discussion back toward landscape. Graham’s Homes for America from 1965-66 and Haacke’s Shapolsky et al.

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30 Jenkins, 5.

31 Ibid., 5.


33 Here I have Graham’s Homes for America from 1966-67 and Haacke’s Manhattan Real Estate Holdings from 1971 in mind. Both works use real estate photography in the service of larger conceptual projects. Graham’s work takes the form of a magazine article in which he comments on the growth of mass housing developments. The full title of Haacke’s work is Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971. In this project, the artist documented the holdings of a notorious slumlord from 1951 to 1971.
Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971 from 1951-71 both directly engage with real estate photography and the machinations of the real estate market. Gordon Matta-Clark worked on a similar project in the early 1970s called “Fake Estates” wherein he purchased from the City of New York small, unusable, and inaccessible plots of land, documented their qualities, and then sold the land and documentation as an art project. See his Reality Properties: Fake Estates, Little Alley Block 2497, Lot 42 from 1974. Matta-Clark was trained as an architect, but soon became involved with Haacke and other artists working with the land such as Robert Smithson.

Although Jenkins does not mention this point, I assume that the book format in which Ruscha published his photography would also contribute to the set of “aesthetic issues” of which the curator was not interested. Of course Schott and other New Topographics photographers also published their work in books. However, their products, such as Adams’s The New West and Baltz’s New Industrial Parks of Irvine, California (both 1974) more fully embraced the concept of the professional photobook: they generally included some kind of introduction, a photographer’s statement, captions, and page numbers. Ruscha’s books instead beg to be experienced and exhibited as objects. On the whole they are rather small, hardbound, and lack obvious order and page numbers. Ruscha’s focus on the book as object, in addition to the fact that he did not actually take all of his own photographs for these books, places him at somewhat of a remove from the discourse of photography.

Ruscha’s body of images serves as an important conceptual source for many of the New Topographics photographers. However, his larger project is not particularly concerned with Jenkins’ thesis of documentary as a style. Then again, if the consideration were strictly aesthetic, and not in comparison to Ruscha’s larger project, his photographs would fit perfectly. While we cannot separate the images from the book, it is easy to understand Jenkins’ conflict in including Ruscha’s work in the final show. The initial choice to exclude Ruscha represents a positive step toward keeping the exhibition current and, in concentrating on a documentary aesthetic in contemporary photography. The curator now reflects that “it might have fleshed out that part of the show that’s not quite so photographic.” Grappling with what was already a tenuous hold on his show’s thesis it would hardly be prudent for Jenkins to flesh out anything non-photographic.

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35 Salvesen, New Topographies, 27.
However, because *New Topographics* has been linked with Ruscha so much in recent scholarship and due to Jenkins’ reliance on the artist as a conceptual anchor for the exhibition, perhaps it would have been appropriate merely to place Ruscha books in the gallery rather than to include his photographs in the exhibition itself.

If Schott’s work represents the aesthetic goals of the *New Topographies* “documentary style,” the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher serves to elucidate Jenkins’ proposed methodology for achieving the documentary aesthetic. Jenkins’ choice to include the Bechers smacks of a last-ditch attempt to provide the theme of documentary with the authority of scientific objectivity. The composition and exhibition of the Bechers’ images stressed an archival mode of organization and classification not evident in the work of other New Topographies. Their work follows the show’s standard stylistic format: use of an 8x10 large format camera, frontal viewpoints, square framing, continuous series, and vernacular architecture as subject matter. However, they make the point of arranging the images into grids for clear comparison, based on differences in function, age, or regional architecture, and supplied with terse, descriptive captions. Often a single “typology,” as they termed these groupings, would consist of multiple views of a single building.36 Thus, the Bechers seem to create textbook diagrams, somewhat similar to the few architectural cross-sections and grids created by artist Gordon Matta-Clark in the form of his “cuttings” from the early 1970s, such as *Splitting* from 1978. Moreover, their work seems to invoke Eugene Atget and August Sander as conceptual sources rather than actual landscape photography. While Demarais begrudgingly admits that “there are certainly elements of topography in the Bechers’ pictures,” he refuses to accept them as documentary. He writes, “the main concern seems to be for subjects as representatives of a class rather than as unique sites needing examination.”37 Both strategies reflect a desire to reveal, to produce as much visual information as possible. This focus on information and classification surely bolstered Jenkins’ stance on documentary as objective and scientific. The Bechers’ work also provided him with a ready-made exhibition format; the curator chose to arrange many of the other photographers’ works in grid form rather than in straight series along the wall.38 The gallery viewer would

37 Demarais, 11.
38 Sichel, 90.
experience these images as a sort of monolithic didactic panel illustrating the first step of the scientific method: observation.

The association with typology also subtly undercuts the conceptual weight of scientific documentation or classification here. While Jenkins hopes to frame the *New Topographics* as “anthropological rather than critical, scientific rather than artistic,” the typological model in anthropology has long since been discredited and stands today as a nineteenth-century pseudoscience. Obviously, we cannot definitively place humans into racial categories simply based on observable phenotypic traits. Thus, while the Bechers’ work may certainly be typological, it is not entirely scientific. Perhaps more than any other collection included in the show, the Bechers’ work typifies the superficiality and Jamesonian “depthlessness” that Jenkins promotes. Just as racial typology is preoccupied with the skin of people, so the Becher’s work concerns the skin of buildings and, by extension, the surface of the photograph. The Bechers work also introduces a hint of historicism into the exhibition. The bulk of their contribution to the show derives from a series begun that year in Pennsylvanian coal country. This nod to the industrial age is surprising considering the bulk of photographers in *New Topographics* documented the consumerist (or, according to Jameson, the late-capitalist) shift in the American economy with images of urban and suburban sprawl.

Realistically, all the typological contradictions mentioned above are only significant if we value Jenkins’ words over those of his critics. He attempts to force a paradigm of what documentary means through the approximation of various documentary-sounding words without qualification: objective, scientific, anthropological, topographic, passive, description, and without author. The real problem is that Jenkins’ main thesis is essentially weak: these photographers all use a similar style that is documentary, and the use of this style is novel. For critics Ratcliff and Demarais, this is simply not enough. Demarais even questions whether this style is applicable to all the photographers exhibited. He writes in his review, “Yet even if these photographs were formally very close to one another—which they are not—their mere visual similarity would be a rather shaky foundation upon which to build a show.” By concentrating solely on style, Jenkins attempts to reinvent the wheel when he need not.

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39 Jenkins, 5-7.

40 Demarais, 11.
In many ways, *New Topographics* can be considered the next logical step after *New Documents* and *Toward a Social Landscape*. However, it seems Jenkins chose not to build off their work and instead attempted to define “documentary” in the most restrictive manner.

Szarkowski and Lyons had done much of the legwork in defining what the document meant to contemporary artistic photography. Szarkowski reframed the photograph as a document of the outside world, specifically the people around the photographer, while Lyons extended the concept of landscape to mean the entirety of the photographer’s spatial surroundings, including extended social and cultural networks. Jenkins needed only to apply these developments to landscape photography. Both his 1975 exhibitions sought to redefine the document in some way.

While *The Extended Document* focused on handmade, conceptual photography’s relationship to vision and reality, *New Topographics* made the document into a piece of scientific evidence. However, in order to focus on developing his own definition of the document, Jenkins pushed aside considerations of the actual landscape. This omission is curious considering the amount of information on geography, topography, and cultural landscape studies in the New Topographics file kept by Jenkins and his staff at Eastman House. Obviously, this information did not make it into the final essay. The key differences between the works exhibited by Jenkins and those exhibited by Szarkowski and Lyons are that (1) the New Topographics photographers principally used large format view cameras to achieve their carefully composed shots while the Winogrand/Friedlander group relied on a snapshot aesthetic; and that (2) the former group eschewed human subjects for the built environment whereas the latter group highlighted the human subject within his built environment. Almost all those who have written on New Topographics have noted the disjunction between the title and the content of the show. Jenkins should have emphasized these differences with respect to the landscape rather than compete with Walker Evans in pursuit of stylelessness.

Rather than analyzing Jenkins’ attempt to define the documentary style, we may perhaps better understand his thesis if we consider it as the outline of a method. While Jenkins initially uses the term “minimal” to describe this style, photography clearly has little to do with Minimalism proper, as that movement consisted largely of sculpture and required the viewer’s

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42 Here I refer to the emphasis on “stylelessness” in Evans and Agee’s text *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1935).
presence to complete the work. While one can never actually enter the represented space of a photograph, art historian Greg Foster-Rice has noted that both projects reflect an interest or participation in systems theory. He gives the definition of systems theory as follows: “complex phenomena cannot be reduced to the discrete properties of their various parts, but must be understood according to the arrangement of and relations between the parts that create a whole. It is this particular organization that determines the system, rather than its discrete parts.”43 While Minimalism acknowledges the networks in place between the viewer, the work, and the environment surrounding both, New Topographics emphasizes the networks of association beyond the edges of the photograph. Because the documentary photograph is necessarily about and of the world, Jenkins’ conception of the documentary photographer as completely impartial denies the photographer’s own relationships to the work he produces. Indeed, this is Ratcliff’s first criticism of the show.44

If we divorce the condition of objectivity and neutrality from the document and documentary style, we can come closer to a more nuanced interpretation of Jenkins’ thesis. The photographic document is an object, has a history/context, and in some way clearly represents a portion of the visible world—in any style that effectively communicates. Documentary style, on the other hand, involves nothing more than a series of aesthetic choices that tend toward the Minimal (those formal characteristics listed previously as well as sharp focus and a geometrical and elegant composition). By not reducing “the document” to a mere style, we reclaim the photographer’s agency by not denying his critical capacity. Perhaps to differentiate his project from those of Szarkowski and Lyons, Jenkins pushed the issue of objectivity to its limit. Only Robert Woolard, in his article “Man-Shaped Landscapes,” seems to go along with Jenkins’ program. He wrote that he was glad to hear a viewer say “I know that place,” attributing this possibility to the show’s documentary capacity. He alone among the contemporary critics addresses viewers’ complaints that the show was boring. He chastises them, writing “Though some of the surfaces may seem dull, the ideas which New Topographics represents are vital and fundamental.”45

44 Ratcliff, 88.
Szarkowski pushes away from Jenkins’ notion of the document as a detached, objective index, writing in his pamphlet essay that his photographers’ “aim has been not to reform life, but to know it. … They like the real world, in spite of its terrors, as the source of all wonder and fascination and value, and find it no less precious for being irrational.”

Jenkins would have his photographers at a far remove, looking at their subjects through glass. Rather than taking the more measured view that documentary style allows the photographer to make a clear statement about the world or about the discipline of photography, Jenkins restricts them to experiments in style and the production of a document in itself, thereby guaranteeing that the exhibited work was far more interesting than anything Jenkins had to say about it. The curator almost clears himself of this stain through a short disclaimer at the beginning of the catalogue essay: “It should therefore be stated at the outset that while this introduction will concern itself with the exhibition as a stylistic event, the actual photographs are far richer in meaning and scope than the simple making of an aesthetic point.” However, he still closes the essay by describing these photographers as “content with observation.”

A more productive way to view New Topographics would be through the lens of documentary style at the myriad networks and connections accessible to the work, including but not limited to: discussion of the photograph as document, historical relationships to nineteenth-century and modernist western landscapes, consumerism, (sub)urban sprawl, ecological catastrophe, topography, and cartography. Rather than the style becoming the dominant curatorial method, as Jenkins seems to imply, style functions as an integral part of the entire system of the method. And, the larger system for all the New Topographics was the man-altered landscape.

In conclusion, curator William Jenkins’ fixation on documentary style in his catalogue essay for the 1975 exhibition New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape reveals his ambivalence regarding the proper manner in which to contextualize and analyze the work included in the exhibition. New Topographics was essentially a broad survey of contemporary currents in landscape photography. Jenkins struggles with connections to the works’ obvious historical antecedents, the work of nineteenth-century survey photographers such

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47 Jenkins, 5, 7.
48 Foster-Rice, 68.
as Carleton Watkins and Timothy O’Sullivan as well as that of twentieth-century modernist photographers Ansel Adams and Minor White. He invokes O’Sullivan’s name and includes a quotation by Robert Adams mentioning Dorothea Lange, but these serve as the only historical references. I believe that this omission serves principally to distance the photographers from their predecessors and the sublime myth, as well as to highlight their newness and distinctiveness, a fight against the inevitable historicism in art outlined by Fredric Jameson.

Instead, Jenkins focused all his energy on explaining the documentary style in New Topographics. Mentioning Walker Evans might have helped his case in equating documentary with objectivity and impartiality. However, rather than rehash the influence of historical landscape or social documentary photography, Jenkins pits the more historically conscious or traditional images (such as Adams and Baltz) against the more scientific and objective (such as the Bechers and Nixon). Without a working definition of documentary, Jenkins’ attempt to silence the photographer’s voice and suppress the systemic connotations prompted by the work’s content fails.

He instead excises the landscape almost completely from his discussion save for a throwaway comment in which he equates topographic recordings with the descriptive function of a photograph. In this manner, he began an unnecessary redefinition of what documentary means in photography; even when John Szarkowski and Nathan Lyons had already begun establishing that trope in the late 1960s. He needed only to expand the concept and apply it to the landscape. As a result, his position ultimately lacks weight. He would have done better to take a more Minimalist/systems approach, examining how the documentary style mediates the viewer’s experience of the various networks of information and relationships referenced in the work, rather than simply explaining that their style is documentary. In summarizing his opinion of the exhibition, Woolard aptly explains the contemporary reaction that the images were quite interesting while Jenkins’ essay was confusing: “There is no way to tell if what this exhibition demonstrates is a passing phenomenon that will fade away now that it has been defined, or if it is the avant-garde of an enduring attitude toward the artistic medium. It is probably a little bit of both, but I, for one, favor the latter suggestion.”

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49 Woolard, 12.
CHAPTER TWO
1970S GENRE THEORY: THE BEGINNINGS OF TRANSFORMATION

The history of photography has not been haunted by the traditional restrictions of genre endemic to other areas of art history. No academic hierarchy has ever existed in photography to absolutely differentiate and rank genres. Of course, certain photographs fall into various categories, such as landscape, portrait, still life, and nude, but the infinite range of photographic applications denies definitive categorization. Perhaps this lack of generic regimentation is due to the only recent emergence of photography as an institutionalized discourse. This academic environment for photography emerged in the 1970s, about 130 years after the medium’s invention.\(^{50}\) Perhaps photographers and critics at the turn of the twentieth century were too concerned with defending photography’s status as an artistic enterprise to worry about the codification of distinct genres.\(^{51}\) Perhaps it is due to photography’s continually dual nature as art and record. From its inception, the practical and artistic applications of photography have been varied and often ambiguous. It is the photograph’s relationship to the visible world—to vision and reality—that we see again and again in scholarship and criticism of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. For example, Henry Fox Talbot’s *Pencil of Nature* (1844–46) absolutely depended on the photograph’s fidelity to the visible world. Works such as a successfully rendered collection of glass vases represented both a mirror of nature and an accurate inventory. Similarly, it was the same assumption of fidelity to life (or nature, or vision, etc.) that gave weight to Matthew Gardner’s and Timothy O’Sullivan’s war photographs—and what caused such outcry when it was revealed that some of the Civil War images were posed. Alfred Stieglitz and the Pictorialists used various means to make their photographs look more like paintings in order to align photography more closely with art than with science or reportage. Roland Barthes has written repeatedly of this quality of “having-been-there,” characteristic of the photographic subject. Perhaps it is this almost tangible connection, the indexical relationship to the original

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50 The first university MFA programs in photography began in the 1970s along with Harold Jones’ founding of LIGHT gallery in New York in 1971 and the foundation of the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, Tucson, in 1975.

51 Here I refer to Henry Peach Robinson’s writings on what constitutes art photography and Alfred Stieglitz’s efforts to establish photography as a valid art form through his gallery, 291, and publication, *Camera Work.*
scene, even if the viewer knows the image has been manipulated, that preserves the insistence on the “documentary” nature of photography.

It is through this last attribute that I will address the question of landscape in photography. George Eastman House curator William Jenkins mounted an exhibition in 1975 that stood at the intersection of the two poles of art and record. By combining landscape and documentary photography, Jenkins placed his exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, at the forefront of the 1970s change in the definition of landscape across media, including photography, sculpture, land art, and installation art.

In order to clarify the transformation of the landscape genre in photography, it is useful to investigate the nature of genre and its transformations as understood by critics of the entire concept of genre in the 1970s. Although the study and codification of genre had a long history in literary theory, a strident criticism of the nature of genre developed in the 1970s. Pre-1970s critics and theorists, such as members of the New Criticism school in America and Maurice Blanchot and Benedetto Croce in Europe, had proclaimed the death of genre and fueled a reexamination of genre theory. The work of John G. Cawelti, professor of popular culture at the University of Chicago, was a key development in genre criticism. Rather than promote the study of “high literature,” Cawelti argues for serious consideration of popular genres, such as the western and the detective story, in both literature and film. His practice contrasts sharply with that of the prominent French structural theorist Tzvetan Todorov, who completely disregards popular genres, and in this thesis I consider landscape a popular genre. In this chapter, I justify my use of a film and pop culture theorist, John G. Cawelti, and contextualize him within the discourse of genre theory. While genre theory as a project emerged from literary theory, I propose that Cawelti’s work lends itself most readily to an examination of photographic genres for two main reasons: the relation of film to photography, and his thematic, rather than structural approach to genre. First, let us look at Todorov’s approach to genre, and then compare his with Cawelti’s approach to showcase the latter as the preferable model.

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52 The active critique and analysis of genre truly began in the 1920s with the Russian Formalist circle including Yury Tynianov, Viktor Shklovsky, and Vladimir Propp. Mikhail Bakhtin should also be included in this group, however, his work on genre was not published until the late 1970s. For my purposes, I will skip a lengthy examination of Russian genre theory in favor of more fully capturing the generic landscape of the 1970s.  

Tzvetan Todorov is a Paris-based, Bulgarian philosopher of literary and culture theory, whose best known work, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, was first published in French in 1970 and then in English in 1971.\(^{54}\) While Todorov’s book attempts to define “the fantastic” in literature, he also outlines his ideal approach to a study of genre.\(^{55}\) In the first chapter, the author describes the nature of his approach as scientific, methodical, and structural.\(^{56}\) According to Todorov, “genres exist at different levels of generality.”\(^{57}\) Thus, genre can be infinitely subdivided into further subgenres. Todorov stops short of advocating the necessity of genre, and instead writes that there is no sense in arguing for the end of genre since, in doing so, one unwittingly propagates the discussion of genre. Therefore, genre must be simply analyzed and discussed in terms of itself.\(^{58}\) In a manner heavily indebted to Saussurian semiology, Todorov dissects genre into three main components: verbal, syntactic, and semantic. The verbal represents the “concrete sentences which constitute the text,” understood through first the original utterance and second through the “performance” of the utterance from the originator to the receiver. The syntactic represents the “composition,” or the “relations which the part of the work sustain among themselves.” The semantic aspect constitutes the “themes’ of the literary text.” Todorov writes that while all three components of the genre function as interrelated, they can be isolated through study.\(^{59}\) While many art historians have used semiotics in the study of art, I struggle to apply Todorov’s purely textual/verbal theory to photography not based in text or

\(^{54}\) Other notable works on genre from the 1970s include Rosalie Coe’s 1973 book *The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance* and Kate Hamburger’s *The Logic of Literature* of the same year. It was not until the late 1970s and after the issuance of many of Bakhtin’s unpublished and unfinished works (including his writings on “speech genres”) that genre criticism as a discourse really “popped,” so to speak. Genre criticism in English blossomed in the 1980s, growing from the foundations of work from the 1970s. Work specifically concerning the “transformation” of genre, however, has still not developed into a full field in its own right.

\(^{55}\) “The fantastic” is any event or person that appears to be supernatural. Todorov also further defines the fantastic uncanny and the fantastic marvelous subgenres.

\(^{56}\) For most of this chapter, Todorov uses Canadian literary theorist Northrop Frye as a foil for his own discussion of genre. Todorov denigrates Frye’s approach to literary genre as derivative, inconsistent, and incoherent. Todorov, 10, 13, 15. Frye’s approach seems Romantic as it relies on mythology and heroic archetypes. For Frye’s views on genre, see the 1957 book, *Anatomy of Criticism*. I choose not to go into further detail with Frye in this chapter because his work is most important as part of the history of genre studies, and does not particularly apply to my project.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 8-9.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 20.
language. A more thematic and visual approach seems more appropriate, as in Cawelti’s work, which I will discuss shortly.

My key concern within genre criticism is the nature and function of generic transformation. Much of Todorov’s work on genre stands in response to the highly theoretical and often contradictory work of French literary theorist Maurice Blanchot. By the mid- to late 1970s, literary critics and theorists began to widen the scope of specific genre criticisms to the larger project of genre itself. Todorov cites Blanchot in such a work: his 1976 article “The Origins of Genre,” later expanded for his 1978 book *Les genres du discours* (unavailable in English until 1990). In order to begin his discussion of the origin and nature of genres he cites Blanchot’s contention that “a book no longer belongs to a genre; every book arises from literature alone, as if the latter possessed in advance, in its generality, the secrets and formulas that alone allow book reality to be given to that which is written.”

Although Todorov rejects Blanchot’s call for the death of genre, he agrees that a book does not belong to genre, but that in “transgressing” traditional boundaries genre is reinforced. Basically, we cannot avoid genre because merely acknowledging its transgression recalls the rules of the genre anyway. He then argues that new genres simply mutate from old ones “by inversion, by displacement, by combination,” without giving further detail. This comment represents perhaps the first mention of the “transformation” of genres in the discourse, and the author quickly moves on to the principal topic of his paper—the actual origin of genre from the simple speech act. Todorov and other literary theorists gloss over the issue well into the 1980s until Alistair Fowler’s summary of all types in *Kinds of Literature* from 1982. There simply does not exist a developed field of study on artistic (much less photographic) genre as exists on film and literature, and even less on generic transformation.

Cawelti introduced his thoughts on transformation as early as 1979 in the article “*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films.” There are two major

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62 Fowler, 232-249. His is a rather conventional approach, attempting to delineate as many concrete forms of generic transformation as possible. He lists nine major processes: topical invention, combination, aggregation, change of scale, change of function, counterstatement, inclusion, selection, and generic mixture. Fowler admits that there could exist further distinct and complex forms of transformation, and devotes another chapter of his book to explaining how genres can further serve as generic modes on top of other genres. Fowler’s work is quite useful in providing terms for defining the nature of transformation processes.
aspects of Cawelti’s œuvre that I find particularly appropriate to a study of New Topographics. First, his research principally concerns film genre as well as popular fiction, so he engages with issues consistent with the study of photography: the necessity of showing stories rather than telling them, the effects of visual repetition and sequencing, and the relationship between image and text. The close relationship between film and photography justifies my decision to use the work of a film scholar rather than that of a literary theorist. While film genre theory necessarily adopted a great deal from literary genre theory, the latter lacks the obvious component of visual representation. Literature can contain imagistic language, but the relationship between image and language is much weaker than that of photography to film. On the other hand, while the relationship between film and photographic history is understandably close, the major component lacking in many photographs is narrative, which gives structure to literary genre. Of course, much of early photography, such as Oscar Rejlander’s combination photograph, The Two Ways of Life, from 1857, depended on narrative devices historically characteristic to painting, it is with the twentieth-century rise of abstract and modernist art photography that narrative came to depend on series and sequence, often in a direct rejection of traditional forms of narrative.

First, my solution to this dilemma of a lack of narrative in modern photography lies in the two complementary essays of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes: “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” and “The Rhetoric of the Image,” respectively. In his essay, Benjamin comments on the necessity of captions for understanding modern photographs, specifically in illustrated magazines. He implies that these images are supposed to convey some sort of “news” to the reader and that they are not “high art” images meant to be contemplated.63 In Barthesian terms, the simple photograph is a “message without a code” and requires a linguistic addition.64 He concludes that this caption is, in essence, what provides a modern photograph with narrative. The creation of narrative in film is a somewhat different process. Barthes and Benjamin both agree that sequence and repetition are what create the structure for narrative in film. For Barthes the lack of text in film is made up for with dialogue. For Benjamin,

64 Barthes, 119.
However, the caption is “internalized” through the sequence of individual images. After all, film is photography set in motion. In *New Topographics*, most of the photographers continued the tradition of textual support in the form of captions and titles. It is William Jenkins who created the larger narrative through, first, the micro-organization of images in sequence grouped by photographer, and then by the macro-organization of the exhibition as a collection of photographic series. He supported the narrative with his own larger interpretive text in the form of the exhibition catalogue.

Second, while literary genre theory of this period is often rigidly structuralist and focused exclusively on “high literature,” Cawelti considers broad popular genres in a more culturally aware, thematic approach. While *New Topographics* is comprised of “high art” photographs, the landscape genre has traditionally remained “popular” and was of special significance during the 1970s, which I will discuss later in the thesis. Cawelti’s broad thematic approach to genre serves my purposes because he places less importance on the technical, structural elements of genre (such as settings, character types, and plot patterns) than on what he calls the underlying myth of the genre, that is, the broad cultural ideology of the time in which the genre operates. Landscape, too, is a kind of popular genre, holding a low position in traditional artistic hierarchy. By the 1970s, landscape had developed an academic standard emulating Ansel Adams and his work.

Adams positioned himself as an authority through his work with Beaumont Newhall and John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art, with Newhall and several curators at the George Eastman House, as co-founder of *Aperture* magazine, and in his material contributions to the Center for Creative Photography. He also established his working methods as standard academic practice through writing about his own work and the work of many other photographers. By 1960, with the Sierra Club’s publication of *This is the American Earth*, Adams’ work was codified under the rubric of the “perfect print” and the idealized western natural landscape,

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65 Rosalind Krauss gives an interesting discussion of Barthes and Benjamin in her article, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2,” *October* 4 (Autumn 1977), 59-66. Her use of them focuses on a semiological discussion of the index in sculptural and architectural art that incorporates photography as a key, though not central, component of a work. For example, Robert Smithson’s land works are often tripartite, comprising of a sited project in the landscape, a portion of this site brought into the gallery, and photographic documentation of the project.

66 Adams published many technical books in his lifetime, beginning with *Making a Photograph* of 1935 and *Camera and Lens* of 1948.

67 The concept of the perfect print, as advocated by f/64 photographers Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, dictated that for every negative, there is one best print that can be produced. Through the photographer’s skill with the camera and in the darkroom, he can create the best print possible, and that best print is the official, exhibitable
such as *The Grand Tetons and the Snake River* from 1942. The connection to the Sierra Club’s advocacy for conservation and Adams’ relation to the mythical western landscape is solidified in Nancy Newhall’s epic poetic text. While many of the photographs in the book do not always show the natural landscape as unsullied and free of erosion, they are still rather idealized and monumentalizing. All are still a far cry from the barren suburban wastelands of *New Topographics*. While looking back from the post-*New Topographics* era at this volume, we are tempted to elide Adams’ images with Newhall’s text as overly sentimental and kitschy, referring to “mother earth,” and the tragic loss of wilderness. A few reviewers of the time praised the text and the images, even mimicking Newhall’s lofty, epic prose in their articles. Reviewer Edward Deevey, from the Zoology Department at Yale, instead lambasts Newhall’s prose as so “overly enthusiastic” as to and make her look “ridiculous” before the opposition to conservation. After the *New Topographics* exhibition and the acceleration of the environmentalist movement, Adams’ work seems almost as trite and overblown as Newhall’s text, putting more weight on preserving “beauty,” than asking the viewer to actually think deeply about a particular issue such as conservation.

This failure to provoke meaningful thought is exactly what Clement Greenberg explained as the commonality between academicism and kitsch. In “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg wrote, “Self-evidently, all kitsch is academic, and conversely, all that’s academic is kitsch. For what is called the academic as such no longer has an independent existence,” and ignores any

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68 Her writing includes a high percentage of hyperbole and apostrophe, that is, speaking directly to the landscape. Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall, *This is the American Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1960).


70 This book seems to have drawn more attention from conservationists, scientists, and teachers than from photography critics. Perhaps this is due to the book’s publication by the Sierra Club and its position as a book specifically about conservation rather than as a specific project of Adams’.

questions that provoke controversy.\textsuperscript{72} \textit{New Topographics} instead challenges Adams’ academic model and represents a transformation in the genre of landscape. Cawelti’s work on generic transformation similarly deals with challenging the rules of kitsch. In “Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films” he takes on a quintessentially kitschy genre of American pulp fiction: the western. Whereas “high literature” genre theory often concerns the innovative outlier as disobeying the rules of its genre, Cawelti’s popular culture theory focuses on the larger societal trends that often necessitate shifts within a conventional genre.\textsuperscript{73}

Cawelti’s three most relevant works consider the formation and function of genre in popular fiction and film.\textsuperscript{74} His first work, \textit{The Six-Gun Mystique} (1971), provides a detailed and expansive overview and analysis of the genre of the American western. This work is especially useful to my study of \textit{New Topographics} as the exhibition has come to signify an entire body of photographic work on the American West. Cawelti’s 1976 publication, \textit{Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture}, takes on the construction of popular genre as a whole while his 1979 article “Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films,” focused solely on the transformation of genre and its implications.

In \textit{The Six-Gun Mystique}, Cawelti details his conception of the structure of popular stories as both genre and formula as separate levels of meaning. Genre, he writes, is the broader construct of “tragedy, comedy, romance, etc.,” while formula is the localization of genre, the specifics of “setting, characters, and action.” Genre, then, “embodies a universal life pattern or myth in the materials of language,” while formula “represents the way in which a particular culture has embodied both mythical archetypes and its own preoccupations in narrative form.” Therefore, the western and the detective story can both represent the larger construct of the hero quest.\textsuperscript{75} Later refining his position in \textit{Adventure, Mystery, and Romance} publication, Cawelti

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{73} Cawelti’s approach seems far more democratic than Greenberg’s as it is comparable to the shift in art history away from the traditional canon toward “visual culture.”
    \item \textsuperscript{74} Cawelti has written other works in a similar trend. These works, however, fall more toward general cultural theory and history rather than literature or film. These include his very first book, \textit{Apostles of the Self-Made Man} from 1965 and \textit{Mystery, Violence, and Popular Culture} from 2004. Cawelti also published a revised and expanded “sequel” to \textit{The Six-Gun Mystique} in 1999. However, I am attempting to keep my discussion of his work to the relevant time period and so will not discuss his later revisions at length.
    \item \textsuperscript{75} John G. Cawelti, \textit{The Six-Gun Mystique} (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971), 29-30.
\end{itemize}
condenses the attributes of formula to questions of plot and character types, but is careful to
stress its interconnectedness with genre, writing that they “might be best understood not as
denoting two different things, but reflecting two phases or aspects of a complex process of
literary analysis.”\(^7^6\) He then explains when it is appropriate for a formula to transcend or
subsume its larger genre and essentially become a distinct “popular genre,” that is, when
comparing a specific “formula story” to others of its kind rather than to a larger universal
archetype (or genre).\(^7^7\) In this way, Cawelti echoes Todorov by arguing for a consideration of the
genre by its own terms. Cawelti is, however, much less concerned than Todorov with an
infinitely reducible, modular conception of genre as divisible into further subgenres. Ultimately,
Cawelti’s conception of genre is much more flexible than that of Todorov. For Cawelti, genre is
a basic structure through which a culture’s habits and concerns can be filtered. I would argue that
landscape is just this sort of “popular genre” within the context of photographic history. Adams’
work certainly became the classical example of western landscape photography with which later
landscapes would constantly be compared. Adams’ formula is by no means “universal” across
cultures, but stands as a U.S. archetype within its genre.

Cawelti’s model of the underlying myth showing through a generic framework lends
itself well to reading alongside William Jenkins’ New Topographics catalogue where the myth is
hovering just below the surface: Jenkins’ unwillingness to invoke Adams or O’Sullivan. The
central point of Jenkins’ theme is that of style, which he employs within the photographic mode
of the documentary. Jenkins assigns attributes to the documentary such as objectivity, scientific
observation, classification, and anthropology. While his writing generally expresses what he sees
as the photographer’s intent, what he really describes are the basic formal components of this
style; the minimal aesthetic, the “straight” approach, and the series format imply a type of
survey. These formal components overlap with what the viewer and the scholar can recognize as
conventions of academic landscape photography—the large format camera, black and white film
(excepting Stephen Shore), and a head-on point of view.\(^7^8\) A criticism of Cawelti, however, is

\(^7^6\) Cawelti, Adventure, 5-7.

\(^7^7\) Ibid., 8.

\(^7^8\) The type of photography shown in New Topographics has subsequently come to be termed “deadpan”
photography. For a more in-depth explanation, see Aron Vinegar, “Ed Ruscha, Heidegger, and Deadpan
Photography” Art History 35, no. 5 (2009), 852-873.
that he does not pay attention to style or visuals in film.\textsuperscript{79} I would argue that Jenkins uses these attributes in a manner that corresponds with Cawelti’s descriptions of the key elements of “formula stories.” This includes the plot, characters, etc., that signal the work as belonging to a particular genre. This is supported by the fact that all the New Topographics photographers exhibited a similar style. By focusing on documentary as style, Jenkins essentially suppressed the key genre at work here: landscape. By rejecting the idealized academicism of Adams, Jenkins transformed the genre of landscape by merging it with documentary. The historical and aesthetic associations with academic landscape—westward expansion and manifest destiny as well as the insistence on the beauty of the western landscape and concepts of the sublime—form what Cawelti would call the mythical underpinnings of the landscape genre. These elements are suppressed by Jenkins. While the single photographs themselves may formally resemble some academic landscape, it is Jenkins’ mobilization of them together that contributes to the generic change.

Cawelti takes a measured shift in position when it comes to the transformation of genres. In \textit{The Six-Gun Mystique}, the author only hints at the possibility of transformation within the genre. He writes generally of the important balance between “convention” with “invention,” convention being the standards of the formula and invention being the injection of something new and different into the genre. He cautions that too much invention eventually leads to a new formula or genre.\textsuperscript{80} In his appraisal of the work in \textit{New Topographics}, Jenkins heralds the exhibition as emblematic of a new style, or formula. He stops short, however, of comparing it to previous models. By 1979, Cawelti had clearly reconsidered the possibility of a rupture of the formula. In “Chinatown,” the author details what he sees as the four major modes of generic transformation in film of the 1970s, which I have already listed.

Of course, after arguing that \textit{Chinatown} (1974) subverted the formula of the hard-boiled detective, Cawelti spent the rest of the essay discussing generic transformation in contemporary westerns. His basic thesis of generic transformation—that too much change would create a new formula—expanded to a much more dire situation. Cawelti argues that extensive changes to the formula pattern reveal an underlying weakness in the genre itself. In this case, the genre must transform when its foundational cultural myth no longer applies to contemporary culture and

\textsuperscript{79} Stephen Neale, “Questions of Genre,” \textit{Screen} 31, no. 1 (Spring 1999), 64.

\textsuperscript{80} Cawelti, \textit{Six-Gun}, 28-29.
thereby fails to engage audiences in a meaningful way. Reflecting on some of the more incredulous reviews of *This is the American Earth*, the *New Topographics* photographers’ rejection of Adams, and Jenkins’ suppression of the historical landscape, it is clear that the traditional myth undergirding landscape photography of the American west had begun to fail for contemporary photographers.

Here, let me briefly summarize the details of Cawelti’s four modes so that I may utilize them effectively in my second chapter. The first mode of generic transformation operates as a type of uncanny. By placing a traditional formula in an unfamiliar context, the viewer is confronted with reality; this confrontation elicits laughter. The second mode operates on the basis of recreating an earlier time, but injecting elements of contemporary society. Therefore, the film may evoke a feeling of nostalgia, but still recognize the change in time. The debunking or “de-mythologization” of myth often extends beyond this evocation of nostalgia. While *Chinatown* invokes the conventional truth-seeking detective of film noir, it reveals the underlying myth as obsolete. Rather than prevail over corruption, J. J. Gittes, the struggling private eye of *Chinatown*, eventually gets swallowed up by the situation and ends up a tragic figure, and not even a tragic hero. The final mode of generic transformation involves the “affirmation of myth for its own sake.” As in the burlesque, the genre is shown to be unrealistic and outdated, but not humorous. All four transformations reconsider the founding myth of the genre, rendering it, if not broken, then at least bruised.

This construction of genre based on an underlying myth and spearheaded by a type of hero or tragic hero has its roots in the earlier genre theory of Northrop Frye, which is also indebted to Carl Jung for this emphasis on myth and archetype. Cawelti’s approach is consistent with the atmosphere at the University of Chicago at the time, where he taught from 1957 to 1980. Cawelti was influenced by the combination of religion, mythology, and psychology promoted by the work of Peter Homans at Chicago and Joseph Campbell, who taught at Sarah Lawrence College from 1934 until 1972. Much of Cawelti’s work on the western and the spy story are dependent on Campbell’s conception of the “monomyth,” or the hero’s journey as a basic narrative pattern. Cawelti’s work represents a drive in academia at this time to break up the

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81 Cawelti, “*Chinatown*,” 510. Cawelti’s article was not included in the 1974 first edition.
82 Ibid., 503.
83 Ibid., 509-510.
basic categories of genre. However, rather than call for the death of genre like previous scholars, Cawelti’s project was more geared toward understanding genres on their own terms, and explaining the transformations in genre as necessary changes, consistent with the manner in which genres work and with their underlying myths.

Admittedly, there are a few problems with Cawelti’s approach. Concerning film genre, David Gorman’s attitude is rather condescending in his Poetics Today review of David Duff’s Modern Genre Theory anthology. While admitting that any genre student must begin with literature, “The question of how best to describe the adventures of Fred Flintstone, Captain Kirk, or Buffy and her vampires...needs to be answered separately from that of how to describe literature” because of popular film’s formulaic nature. It seems that the majority of film genre research has focused on so-called “genre film.” Here, genre film has the same sort of connotations as kitsch—a field popular with the middle and/or lower classes, and is not characterized as intellectual, “high art.” Indeed, the point of using Jungian/Campbellian myth is to universalize and generalize. The “collective unconscious” is downright democratizing in its essentialization of culture. While New Topographics represents a transformation in the popular genre of landscape, the exhibition becomes known as a sophisticated, “high art” innovation. As such, I am not making an exact one-to-one comparison. Agreeing with Gorman that film genre can be an entirely different field from literature genre, we must acknowledge that many of the questions are the same: the definition and structure of genre; how and why genres are created and transformed; how genre relates to the culture of its time.

Jacques Derrida made a bold statement criticizing the strict structural approach of Todorov and others in his 1978 essay, “The Law of Genre.” His hyperbolic language draws attention to the overly rigid rules of structural genre criticism: “Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres. I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them...As soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn.” He mockingly parrots Todorov’s contention that simply not adhering to generic rules immediately recalls and reinforces those rules by calling attention to the nature of the

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86 Derrida, 220-221.
transgression. And, perhaps Todorov is correct in this catch-22 of genre. After all, a key point in this thesis is my own contention that in all but ignoring the “landscape” aspect of *New Topographics*, Jenkins is somehow making a statement about the entire genre of landscape in photography. Similarly, Cawelti avoids focusing on the verbal and textual in order to bring out the underlying mythical framework. This approach lends itself well to a consideration of visual, non-textual media.  

Ultimately, I think a thematic/mythic approach is simply more interesting than a semiotic or purely structural approach.

Film scholar Steve Neale has also criticized this mythological approach. In his 1990 article “Questions of Genre,” Neale faults Cawelti for focusing narrowly on one genre at a time, rather than any “generic regimes,” that is, larger schools or trends of genres across time. However, this was the trend when Cawelti wrote his most important works in the 1970s, and so he was in keeping with the scholarship of the time. Neale also writes that authors of this strategy “pay little attention to aesthetics—for them form is always, and only, a wrapping for the cultural or ideological content in which they are almost certainly interested.” Though this description may accurately describe Cawelti’s approach, I think what Neale means here is not Aesthetics, but simply the formal and stylistic qualities of a film. He is correct, but these things do not necessarily have anything to do with Cawelti’s larger project and so I do not think he needs to engage them extensively. Neale also raises some more general concerns, which can still be applied to Cawelti’s work. He writes that the term “genre” is a nineteenth-century term explicitly associated with popular literature and other non-high-literary popular written material, and that continuing to use the term is disingenuous. He also complains that film genre theory is overly focused on American popular genres and genre films produced in Hollywood.  

Ultimately, he argues for a more expansive study of genre—one that crosses the boundaries of individual, popular genres into “high art” movies as well as a larger study of genre itself. He also hopes that future scholarship will consider genre across the “institutional connections” of “theatre, radio, television, and popular music.” Such a broad view of genre will surely take time.

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87 Or, in which the textual support has been minimized.
88 Neale, 64-65.
89 This seems true when looking at the key film genre studies coming out of the 1970s. This includes the abovementioned anthology in which Cawelti’s *Chinatown* article first appears and the publication of Barry K. Grant’s anthology, *Film/Genre: Theory and Criticism* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1977).
90 Neale, 62 n. 38, 66.
While Cawelti argues for the elevation of popular genre in scholarship as a way to increase enfranchisement, so to speak, and to open up the genre to change, Jenkins’ exhibition similarly opens up the landscape genre heading into the postmodern age. Firstly, he combines landscape with a separate genre, documentary. Secondly, he barely mentions the obvious precedents, which allows the viewer to either reject them or seek to actively integrate them. We can see *New Topographics* as a direct rejection of historical landscape photography through a rejection of the “natural” landscape, or we can see it as the next step in landscape photography, a new direction that incorporates past and present genres including deadpan, real estate, modernist, typology, aerial, urban, suburban, etc.

For my consideration of the genre of landscape in photography, the study of a single genre works best in its small focus and scale. Also, Cawelti’s thematic, cultural approach is appropriate to such a specific genre—that of American western landscape photography—which depends so much on the mythic literature of the West for its cultural standing. Indeed, as Jenkins essentially redefines the genre of landscape in photography, it is important to question not just the formulaic structures of landscape, the aesthetic conventions, but also the entire cultural myth that underlies the foundation of the genre. In this chapter I have expressed film’s close relationship with photography as my reason for choosing a film historian over a literary theorist. Additionally, the cultural historian’s approach toward the popular genre and its concerns with cultural myths justify my choice of his work over that of a strict literary structuralist. I have also placed Cawelti within the context of the burgeoning field of genre criticism in film and literature of the 1970s. Through the use of Cawelti’s key writings on genre, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, “*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films,” and *Mystery, Adventure, Romance*, I plan to analyze the manner in which Jenkins facilitates transformation of the landscape genre, leading to a consideration on what it means to deny the genre’s underlying myths. In the following chapter, I examine the nature of *New Topographics*’ historical precedents and how they contributed to the formation of an art historical discourse on U.S. western landscape photography. I then explore the ways in which *New Topographics* defies these precedents by engaging with their underlying myths in order to foster a new consideration of landscape for the 1970s.
CHAPTER THREE

THE EXHIBITION: DEBUNKING THE MYTH OF THE WEST

Before detailing the types of generic transformations I see at work in *New Topographics*, I must set out the conventions that Jenkins and the show’s photographers sought to engage. In the previous chapter I explained the origins of transformation in literary genre. I also mentioned Ansel Adams’ importance as a key figure in the history of landscape photography with regard to his own photographic work. His influence is further felt through his critical and technical writings, as well as through his relationship with photography curator and historian Beaumont Newhall. The discourse on landscape photography as an art form began with the rise in popularity of Adams’ San Francisco-based Group f/64 in the early 1930s and continued into the 1970s with his and Newhall’s “rediscovery” of nineteenth-century landscape photographers, specifically Timothy O’Sullivan. Thus, the language typically used to describe landscape photography in this period is characterized by a hybrid vocabulary of the modernist project promoted by Adams and Newhall and the landscape conventions held over from the nineteenth-century by more historically-focused scholars such as James Horan and Weston Naef.

Adams is also tied up in promoting the work of the American western land survey photographers of the nineteenth-century, most notably Timothy O’Sullivan.91 Many of the artistic conventions surrounding landscape and architecture photography, such as notions of the picturesque and sublime (filtered through painting, of course) originate in the nineteenth century.92 Due to the influence of Adams and Beaumont Newhall, the Museum of Modern Art and the George Eastman House formulated the art historical discourse on this genre, as well as its public perception. Adams greatly admired the work of O’Sullivan, and introduced his activities into the lives of many other photographers.93

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91 Carleton Watkins seems not to have gained momentous popularity within this group until Weston Naef took up his cause with the 1975 exhibition *Era of Exploration: the Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West* and his many subsequent publications on Watkins, most of which occurred during his stint at the Getty Museum, and the latest of which came out in 2011.

92 I do not have the space here to go into greater detail on the relationship of landscape photography to painting in the nineteenth century, but suffice it to say that here I am thinking of the Hudson River School and its “second wave” painters of the American West such as Albert Bierstadt. By 1975, the association between landscape photography and painting of the nineteenth century is well documented. For example, see Jenkins’ brief mention of O’Sullivan on page 6 of the original *New Topographics* catalogue and the first three chapters in Weston J. Naef and James N. Wood, *Era of Exploration: the Rise of Landscape photography in the American West, 1860-1885* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976).
landscapes to Newhall. In his memoirs, *Focus*, Newhall wrote that after requesting some of Adams’ work for MoMA’s first exhibition on photography, *Photography 1839-1937* (1937), Adams also sent him “a collection of original prints, chiefly by a man named Timothy O’Sullivan, taken in the Southwest about 1870. A few of the photographs are extraordinary—as fine as anything I have ever seen.” The curator “accepted the loan with enthusiasm. [He] had already selected a number of O’Sullivan’s Civil War photographs, but [he] knew nothing about his equally fine photographs of the southwestern frontier.”93

Promotion of O’Sullivan at MoMA continued with the inclusion of “landscapes of the American Southwest by Timothy H. O’Sullivan” in Nancy Newhall’s photography section of the massive 1944 museum-wide show *Art in Progress*.94 In 1949, while preparing for the opening of the George Eastman House, some of the first works Newhall bought for the GEH were Alexander Gardner’s 1866 *Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War* and George M. Wheeler’s “*Photographs Showing Landscapes of the Western Territories of the United States* (1875) taken by Timothy O’Sullivan and William Bell.”95 The curator continued his support of O’Sullivan at GEH, with the 1966 exhibition *T. H. O’Sullivan: Photographer*. The same year saw the publication of James D. Horan’s *Timothy O’Sullivan, America's forgotten photographer; the life and work of the brilliant photographer whose camera recorded the American scene from the battlefields of the Civil War to the frontiers of the West*. Only very limited scholarly work had been written on O’Sullivan previous to this exhibition, with short biographical sketches with representative samples of his work included in Ralph W. Andrews’ 1964 book *Picture Gallery Pioneers* and slight mentions in two issues of *Image*, the Eastman House journal, from 1953 and 1958. John Szarkowski had included some of O’Sullivan’s landscapes in the 1963 MoMA exhibition *The Photographer and the American Landscape*, which constituted a small survey of landscape photography from O’Sullivan to Ansel Adams to Paul Caponigro and his compatriots of the 1950s.

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94 Newhall, 107.

95 Ibid., 198. I think it is safe to say that by this second collection he means images specifically from the *Geographical Explorations and Surveys West of the 100th Meridian*. If it was published in 1875, this collection would have included images from the 1871 and 1873 seasons, though the survey ended in 1876.
Much of this work on O’Sullivan casts him as a great, just-discovered, hidden national treasure. Scholars focus on his status as an intrepid survey photographer, a pioneer who tackled the challenge of the West. Newhall turns the photographer into a hero, writing of his travails seemingly against all odds: “In one dangerous rapid the furious water jammed [the crew’s] sailboat between rocks, threatening wreck. O’Sullivan, a fine swimmer, plunged overboard and was hurled a hundred yards downstream. Breathless, torn, and battered, he crawled back along the shore, caught the rope his companions threw him, and warped the boat to safety.” Newhall describes similar encounters with “volcanic convulsions” and “snowdrifts forty or fifty feet deep.”96 This catalogue essay also exhibits a broad romanticization of the West, describing the landscape as something as epic as the photographer himself. Rivers are “majestic” while Shoshone Falls exhibits “Dantean chasms” and “deafening noise.” The writing recalls Nancy Newhall’s text for This is the American Earth when we read “Men grew to love this enormous savage earth where each rising or receding wave of mountains disclosed new worlds.”97 Typically, in his short “appreciation” for this catalogue, Ansel Adams praised O’Sullivan’s eye and technical skill. He describes the photographs as “perceptive images, well-composed, of high technical quality, and definitely suggesting a creative personality. The single-weight albumen prints were neatly mounted on horizontal album cards and the effort as a whole revealed excellent craftsmanship and respect for the medium.”98

Contrary to Newhall and Adams’ modernist approach to the man and his work, the focus on individual genius and the single best print, Weston Naef presents a more comprehensive and historically-grounded view of nineteenth century landscape photography with his 1975-1976 exhibition, Era of Exploration: the Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West, 1860-1885. A collaboration between the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where Naef was assistant curator of photographs and prints, and the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, New York, this exhibition presented a sweeping survey with five different photographers: Carleton E. Watkins, Timothy H. O’Sullivan, Eadweard J. Muybridge, Andrew Joseph Russell, and William Henry Jackson. In the catalogue, Naef devoted roughly thirty pages of text and images to each

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96 Newhall and Newhall, T. H. O’Sullivan, no page numbers.
97 Ibid.
photographer, as well as over seventy pages of contextual and historical information including, among others, sections on “Government Patronage,” “Western Railroads and the Landscape of Travel,” and “American Landscape and the European Antecedents.” In addition to the genealogy of French and British landscape photography, Naef details the conscious and unconscious influence of nineteenth-century painter-writers Asher B. Durand and Thomas Cole on the debates over representing “pure landscape,” and nature.  

While previous discourse on O’Sullivan focused on reclaiming him as a modernist master, Naef’s exhibition is a monument to the history of the period and the mythology of the American West. Popular art magazines of the time propagate this romanticization of the West and of the relationship of photography to painting. Probably due to a rise in nostalgia accompanying the centennial year of 1976, *Art in America* and *Artforum* published articles strictly on American landscape and seascape painting, both of the West and of New England, and mostly nineteenth-century. Almost all of the photography was from nineteenth-century surveys, except for one review of *New Topographics* by Carter Ratcliff in *Art in America*.

Although I have already discussed Ratcliff’s review in my first chapter, it is interesting to look at the language in his review here. The article is titled “Route 66 Revisited: The New Landscape Photography.” While the title simply apes Jenkins’, it is the subtitle that is suggestive of my project: “With much of the face of the nation transformed into a vast nowhere-in-particular, a man-made wilderness has emerged. A new generation of photographers is exploring this discard realm.”

He utilized the language of earlier landscape scholarship with the key words “nation,” “wilderness,” and “exploring.” His specification of a “new generation” was consistent with Szarkowski’s calling them “these younger photographers” in *American Landscapes*, though this was not until 1981.

This kind of language emphasizes *New Topographics’* break with its historical precedents. However, rather than simply reject historical precedents out of hand, New Topographics photographers instead engage with previous conventions in a manner so as to reveal them as outdated or overused. For example, the Bechers’

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work in *New Topographics* focused on the architecture of a colliery in Pennsylvania, highlighting an outdated relic of the industrial revolution rather than a monument to a past great culture as O’Sullivan’s Canyon de Chelly or the picturesque ruins of Gustave Le Gray.

As genre scholars have noted, genres are not simply born and destroyed. They grow out of previous conventions. As Cawelti has written, genres must transform when their founding myths can no longer be supported. In *New Topographics* we see conscious transformation of the genre in the use of familiar tropes by the photographers and in Jenkins’ mobilization of the historical discourse on landscape photography. Much of the work in the show functions on the level of a kind of uncanny—by placing a conventional formula in an unfamiliar context, the viewer is shaken from the confines of the myth and is confronted with a reality that does not meet expectation.

We can see this function at work in the photographs of John Schott. His series *Route 66 Motels* of 1973 focuses largely on the mimicking of vernacular architecture in commercial buildings. For example, an untitled photography from this series apes pueblo and Spanish colonial architecture of the West with its rounded, (presumably) white or tan stucco exterior, modular form, and the exposed wood roof supports. The interjection of native architectural types onto a commercial strip is notably postmodern, capitalizing on the history of the West for the sake of tourism and whitewashing the elimination of Native Americans from land that was soon to be settled by whites. The juxtaposition of the modern automobile with the faux-pueblo prompts the viewer to consider the building as both an artifact of a previous time (and previous landscape tradition) and as a currently occupied dwelling, one housing tourists and probably not Native Americans. The series recalls Ed Ruscha’s less consciously photographic *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) and other books.

Both projects reflect the work being done by architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour in the late 1960s and early 1970s, published as the book *Learning From Las Vegas*. Their research specifically involved study of the appropriation of vernacular, that is, native or common, architecture for commercial use in the West. Venturi and Scott

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Brown’s work, as well as Schott’s, invokes the postmodern cannibalization of historical forms. In this case, the effect involves the appropriation of native cultures’ forms.

This is a familiar trope in the history of landscape photography, specifically for the nineteenth-century surveys. Often these surveys included images of Native Americans, as in O’Sullivan’s images for the Wheeler survey, for the purpose of “preserving” the image of the “Indian” before he went extinct. As many have pointed out, O’Sullivan posed many of the Native Americans in his photographs as if they were scientific exhibits, even going so far as to mark a number underneath a sitting man in his *View on Apache Lake, Sierra Blanca Range, Arizona: Two Apache Scouts in the Foreground* (1873). This rhetoric can be extended to what is one of the photographer’s most famous images: the *Canyon de Chelly, Arizona* from 1873. In this context, the ancient ruins represent an epic past culture and portend the future for nineteenth-century natives. With this image O’Sullivan documented the architectural remains of an extinct culture whose cause of extinction is nebulous. Schott instead documents the radical appropriation and distortion of the common forms of non-extinct cultures for commercial use from the viewpoint of the late twentieth century, when we know exactly the steps the U.S. government took to push Native Americans into minority status. The result of Schott’s work is part architectural study, part social commentary, and a reconsideration of the western landscape through a familiar trope. Thus Schott walks a fine line between commercial and art photography, landscape and architectural photography, and humorous irony and serious documentation.

However, the exhibition also connects to and reconsiders historical convention in more positive ways. Allusions to Ansel Adams as the standard-bearer of landscape and Walker Evans as representative of documentary photography serve to legitimize *New Topographics* as a serious endeavor, connected to the history of photography. Among the photographers in the show, Robert Adams is the most fervent devotee of Ansel Adams. In fact, Robert Adams has said that the first photograph he purchased was the older photographer’s *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico* (1941) and that *This is the American Earth* inspired his love of landscape. The younger photographer apparently was hesitant to enter the show because “the curator had described it as a post-Ansel Adams endeavor.” His works in the exhibition alternate between an on-the-ground

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103 Kelsey, 717.

104 Britt Salvesen, “New Topographies,” *New Topographies: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (Germany: Steidl, 2010), 44.
viewpoint where the primary structure blocks the horizon, as in *Tract House, Westminster, Colorado* from 1974, and a raised perspective in which the photographer looks down over the landscape. This second type often involves a low horizon with primacy given to a beautifully rendered expansive sky. Adams’ *Mobile Home, Jefferson County, Colorado* (1973) is of this second type. Much of Frank Gohlke’s work in the show also utilizes this format as does much of Lewis Baltz’s work, such as his *Foundation Construction, Many Warehouses, 2891 Kelvin, Irvine* from 1974. This formula recalls specifically the epic landscapes of Ansel Adams. In using this visual format, Robert Adams is the historical voice in the show, calling attention to the history of idealization and romanticization of the West, and not rejecting it out of hand. In photographing roughly similar locations as Ansel Adams, Robert placed himself within this continuum and advocates a contemporary viewpoint. Indeed, both photographers depict the contemporary built environment in their images, though this facet seems less important to the older photographer. Robert Adams’ approach differed significantly from that of Ruscha or Schott as he has written, “Fundamentally I think we need to rediscover a non-ironic world.”

However, while one can argue that Robert Adams’ work is intensely personal at times, Jenkins’ mention of Evans in the exhibition catalogue creates a link to that photographer’s brand of documentary photography as opposed to the more personal approach of Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander. And, at roughly forty years from Evans’ *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Jenkins could count on Evans’ testament to “stylelessness” as supporting his own promotion of the document as a style. Often, photographers’ work in the show combines these various emerging tropes of postmodern landscape photography. For example, the majority of Baltz’s work in his first portfolio, *The Prototype Works*, and to a lesser extent the second portfolio, *Industrial Parks of Irvine* California, combines a modernist aesthetic of clean lines, strong tones, and beautiful printing with a minimalist visual style and a deadpan approach. See his *Northwest Wall, Unoccupied Industrial Spaces, 17875 C and D, Skypark Circle, Irvine* from 1974.

Furthermore, curators at the Eastman House had been experimenting with defining the document for over a decade by the opening of *New Topographics*. These included *Toward a Social Landscape* (1966), *Persistence of Vision* (1967), *Vision and Expression* (1969), *T. H. O’Sullivan* (1966), and *The Extended Document* (1975). The two “vision” exhibitions were not strictly about the document, but, at the end, the main criterion of the document is that it represent

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105 Salvesen, 27.
the visual world in a relatively “faithful” manner. As written, Jenkins’ conception of the landscape photograph as document directly contradicts the modernist heroicization of the landscape photographer as the independent, personally interpretive, surveyor-adventurer. The contention that both nineteenth- and twentieth-century landscape photographers have no style is directly related to the strength of their own inventions. Britt Salvesen attempts to support Jenkins’ thesis of styleness by highlighting the focus on buildings in New Topographics images: “there was no ready pictorial formula for portraying their ordinariness.” A similar argument has been made for the styleness of nineteenth-century survey photographers: that they had no precedents from which to draw pictorial conventions. Ultimately, both contentions are disingenuous because both groups did have pictorial conventions to draw upon. Of the two groups, O’Sullivan and his contemporaries had no photographic conventions—only landscape painting—, so their formation of a style would have been diverse and synthetic, though not complete invention. New Topographics represents a similar synthetic style: over a century of landscape photography combined with a new view toward architecture.

The point here is one of invention—the landscape photographer had been valorized by Ansel Adams, Beaumont Newhall, and John Szarkowski as an intrepid inventor. Adams appreciated O’Sullivan in terms of his own working method. Adams was known for his practice of previsualization. Adams writes in his “Personal Credo”:

> Of course, seeing, or “visualization,” is the fundamentally important element. A photograph is not an accident—it is a concept. It exists at, or before, the moment of exposure of the negative. From that moment on to the final print, the process is chiefly one of craft; the pre-visualized photograph is rendered in terms of the final print by a series of processes peculiar to the medium.

This idea places the emphasis on the photographer’s agency and invention in “making” a picture rather than just “taking” a picture. Previsualization goes hand in hand with the cult of the “perfect print”—the modernist assertion that each photograph is carefully crafted by the

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106 Ibid., 22.
108 Conceivably, they could have seen the work of British and French landscape photographers such as Gustave Le Gray’s, who worked throughout the 1850s. However I am not sure if that work would have made it across the Atlantic soon enough.
photographer and so stands as a single, individual, and autonomous work of art.\textsuperscript{109} Jenkins’ assertions of “neutrality,” “anthropolog[y],” and “science” directly contradict Adams’ process by suppressing the role of the photographer as inventor. Jenkins’ photographer is a detached, passive observer, making photographs that are “primarily about that which is in front of the lens.”\textsuperscript{110} Theoretically, a purely “documentary” photograph should also be capable of wide reproduction and distribution, rather than privileging a single print, especially since the New Topographics photographers all work in series. Robert Adams has written of consciously underexposing and underdeveloping his film in order to create a general grayness in his image so that not one photograph stands out from its group.

Szarkowski hints at this shift in the 1963 catalogue for \textit{The Photographer and the American Landscape}. After valorizing Stieglitz as the apex of personal expression in photography (even in his landscapes) and Ansel Adams as the maker of big beautiful landscapes, Szarkowski shifts position with a quotation from photographer William Current: "For myself, I have become tired of the otherness of things. I now want to photograph the real fact."\textsuperscript{111} He opines that perhaps the next generation will make something more like documentary landscapes. By 1981 and the staging of his exhibition \textit{American Landscapes}, he shifts position slightly, to which I will return shortly. Ultimately, Jenkins’ emphasis on documentary style debunks the myth of the western landscape photographer as an intrepid photographer-adventurer cum modernist artist. A clear result of this effect is the willingness of art historians to reassess the nineteenth-century work in terms of the photographers various roles and occupations, as well as the intended purposes (if any) for their images. Rosalind Krauss famously attacked the modernist appropriation of survey photographers into the museum, writing that the act was inappropriate and unfairly and anachronistically placed aesthetic concerns on photographs that were primarily utilitarian in serving the goals of the survey or in obtaining funding.\textsuperscript{112}


\textsuperscript{110} Jenkins, 7, 5.

\textsuperscript{111} Szarkowski, \textit{The Photographer and the American Landscape}, 5.

\textsuperscript{112} See Rosalind Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View.” Krauss later included this essay as part of her book, \textit{The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 131-150.
Finally, Jenkins’ conception of *New Topographics* can be seen as transforming the landscape genre through reaffirming the underlying myth as, in fact, a *myth* and not a reality. Cawelti wrote that a genre’s myth must be destroyed before it can be reaffirmed for a new age.113 This is tricky as Jenkins hardly discussed “landscape” at all in his catalogue essay. Other than mentions of other landscape photographers, this is the extent of his treatment:

The word *topography* is in general use today in connection with the making of maps or with land as described by maps and it does not unduly stretch the imagination to see all photographs as maps of a sort. But for the sake of clarity a return to the original meaning may be helpful: “The detailed and accurate description of a particular place, city, town, district, parish or tract of land.” The important word is *description* for although photography is thought to do many things to and for its subjects, what is does first and best is describe them.114

Basically, he justified his use of the word “topography,” by the fact that the photographs are merely “descriptive” of a place or space. I argue that his reluctance to engage with the larger concept of landscape essentially served to concentrate the reader’s focus on his argument for style. This is the conflict most often recognized in the disjunction between the exhibition’s title and the images in the show. Since none of the images could be seen as strictly as conventional “landscapes,” for the simple fact that they all foreground architecture. If Jenkins had framed the show around architectural photography, it would not take up such a large part in the discourse of landscape. Of course, other photographers had included architecture in landscape images before, but it was not as prominent as in *New Topographics*. In an email to the author on December 11, 2012, Jenkins stated that the show began as focused on architecture, rather than on landscape. In a later email on February 18, 2013, he admitted to taking the “topographies” part from the history of British landscape, such as the work of Francis Frith, Francis Bedford, and James Valentine, in whom GEH curator Robert Sobieszek was interested. Therefore, can we assume that architecture and landscape are close enough so as to represent two sides of the same conceptual coin? Robert Adams and John Szarkowski both came to the conclusion that the biggest problem facing the landscape (physical and photographic) was its segregation from human life. Szarkowski wrote in his foreword to Adams’ 1974 book *The New West* that “the landscape is, for us, the place we live. If we have used it badly, we cannot therefore scorn it,

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113 Cawelti, “Chinatown,” 509.
114 Jenkins, 6.
without scorning ourselves. … [I]t is still our place, and before we can proceed we must learn to love it.” The way to do this is to not segregate ourselves from the landscape. He further wrote that Adams made his buildings “look, in an unsparing way, natural,” and “important, as the relics of an ancient civilization.” Thus he connects Adams’ images to the historical tradition of the “natural” landscape and its acceptable architectural elements: monuments.

Whereas O’Sullivan and Watkins often included tents, wagons, or people in their photographs, they were never shown as fully integrated into the landscape. This is especially true of Watkins’ more conventional landscapes that consciously played on the picturesque in their isolation of an already identified viewing point, such as or Watkins’ Yosemite Valley from the Best General View or El Capitan, both from 1866, and the sublime with an emphasis on the hugeness of trees such as Grizzly Giant and dangerously steep mountain promontories. Thus by removing all the people and any debris or physical evidence other than architecture from their images, New Topographics photographers took this concept even further in order to reveal its failure. In this exhibition, the landscape was fully settled, but we were still not integrated within it. New Topographics showed the potential for this integration. Surely most of the locations in the exhibition are identifiable due to the included captions, which often give a city name if not an exact address. However, theses locations are not monuments—the photographers did not seek out well known “views” to memorialize. While Schott photographed down Route 66 and Ruscha did Every Building on the Sunset Strip (1966), they focused on the ubiquity and interchangeability of the built structures, which could have existed almost anywhere in the U.S. Just the opposite, this fact reflects Jenkins’ contention that the works merely document the landscape and its constituent parts. Many of the images are so generic and familiar to the collective American visual memory that they could be anywhere— for example, Baltz’s suburban factory warehouses and Nixon’s aerial city views.

In his introduction to the same book, Robert Adams mocked the concept of the “sublime” and asked sarcastically, “why open our eyes anywhere but in undamaged places like national parks?” Szarkowski continues this attitude in the catalogue essay to his 1981 exhibition American Landscapes. While this exhibition, twenty years after his first landscape show at


116 Robert Adams, introduction to The New West ((The Colorado Associated University Press, 1974), xi-xii.
MoMA, still concerns just the “natural” landscape, he takes a wider consideration of the genre, through distilling the differences between O’Sullivan’s approach and Watkins’, and between New Topographics and its antecedents. He hit the problem right on the nose when he wrote that these older models no longer work for the new generation of photographers: "such country is not theirs; not by right of early memory or personal discovery or long travail or habit; it is theirs only in the sense that the objects in a public museum are theirs. One describes such public treasures with a sense of respectful disengagement, and awkwardness.”

Jenkins framed this generation as fundamentally opposed to and tired of the conventional concept of “wilderness.” With the eventual closing of the frontier, and then the housing boom of the 1960s and 1970s, most of the “wilderness” left in the United States is demarcated within the boundaries of national parks. New Topographics seems, for the moment, to declare the end of the natural landscape in photography. This is where Jenkins stopped short of making a truly decisive statement and instead phrased the exhibition as a sort of “thinking aloud”: “If New Topographics has a central purpose it is simply to postulate, at least for the time being, what it means to make a documentary photograph,” but not what it means to make a landscape.

While Jenkins avoided making a decisive statement about the nature of landscape photography in his catalogue essay, everything else about the exhibition signals change. Specifically, the “new” in the title New Topographics, and the phrase “man-altered,” signal an obvious break from the past. His mentions of historical precedents suggest a need to acknowledge the antecedents against which to frame his show. Jenkins cites Timothy O’Sullivan for landscape and a quotation from Robert Adams referring to Dorthea Lange and Ansel Adams. It is my belief that Jenkins’ general omission of a dedicated discussion on landscape serves to break these images from the history of landscape photography and recontextualize them within the burgeoning discourse of the document in contemporary photography. We can interpret this change in terms of a transformation of the landscape genre through the use of Cawelti’s modes of the humorous burlesque, the evocation of nostalgia, the disproving of myth, and the destruction and subsequent reaffirmation of myth as myth rather than as reality. As such, the exhibition reveals various transformations the genre while still engaging with its conventions and history.

\[117\] Szarkowski, American Landscapes, 14.
CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis I have sought to establish *New Topographics* as a clear departure from the two standard, academic forms of American western landscape photography: the nineteenth-century survey work of photographers such as Timothy O’Sullivan and Carleton Watkins, and the modernist landscapes of Group f/64, represented by Ansel Adams and Edward Weston from the 1930s through the 1950s. Rather than simply a departure, *New Topographics* represents a significant transformation of the genre of western landscape in contemporary photography. As John Cawelti has written, genres must transform when they no longer serve the needs of a culture. I have used Cawelti’s modes of transformation as a framework for delineating the transformation in the genre of landscape. Prior to *New Topographics*, the literature on this genre praised the landscape photographer as a heroic innovator, creating fantastic images with no precedent and all on his own merit. The landscape was discussed in terms of the western keywords nature, wilderness, and frontier. William Jenkins recast the landscape photographer as a documentarian, whose personality was removed from the picture-making process so that the image could “speak” for itself. By foregrounding the idea of documentary style over the genre of landscape, and also combining the two genres of documentary and landscape, Jenkins suppressed the landscape aspect in order to reconsider the images as documents, somewhere between the relatively “objective” images of Walker Evans and the thoroughly personal documents of Winogrand and Friedlander, the authors of John Szarkowski’s *New Documents*.

While the nineteenth-century work had been consistently popular in the U.S., *New Topographics* seems to have spawned new interest in the older images, in addition to its own project. The 1980s saw a major upswing in scholarship on nineteenth-century survey photography and landscape in general. John Szarkowski’s *American Landscapes* and Joel Snyder’s *American Frontiers: the Photographs of Timothy H. O’Sullivan, 1867-1874* both opened in 1981, the former at MoMA and the latter at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cook’s book *Landscape and Photograph*, a considered study of the genre as a whole, was published in 1985. More recently, the 2000s saw a great interest in *New Topographics* with several publications: the 2009 restaging of the exhibition by Britt
Salvesen and the resulting 2010 College Art Association panel as well as the 2011 catalogue *Seismic Shift: Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal and California Landscape Photography, 1944-1984*, produced in conjunction with the larger Pacific Standard Time initiative celebrating California art in general.

I hope that in the future, art historians will consider *New Topographics* not just in comparison to other previous movements in photography, but to the other artistic projects of its time. While Salvesen has made the connection to real estate photography, Greg Foster-Rice to systems theory, and Finis Dunaway to environmentalism, there is much to be done regarding the spatial revolution of the 1970s. Gordon Matta-Clark’s cuttings depend fundamentally on their architectural support, which eventually is demolished, an act of creating and destroying a spatialized landscape. Similarly, Robert Smithson (and other land artists) creates works that must function within various landscapes and spaces, which must then be documented via photography in order to last as saleable artworks. I avoided delving into the vast literature on cultural landscape studies because it was not particularly helpful in my consideration of generic transformation, but J. B. Jackson’s works are surely relatable to this spatial phenomenon. *New Topographics* is just the most obvious photographic representation of this larger concern for space, place, landscape, and architecture evident across artistic media in the 1970s.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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