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Robert Adams and the Mythology of the Landscape of the American West

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Robert Adams and the Landscape of the American West

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of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

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August 2013

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Table of Contents

Image List for *The New West* ................................................................. v

Image List for Other Photographs .......................................................... ix

Introduction ............................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1 ............................................................................................... 10

Chapter 2 ............................................................................................... 31

Conclusion ............................................................................................. 53

Bibliography .......................................................................................... 60

Illustrations ............................................................................................ 63
Image List- The New West


Figure 10. Adams, Robert. 1968- 1974. Pikes Peak, Colorado Springs, and the highway from the prairie. Yale University Art Gallery. Reproduced from Robert Adams, The
New West: Landscapes along the Colorado Front Range (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2000), 21.


Other Photographs Image List


**Introduction**

Isolated in the vast expanse of a newly built tract home division, a young child and his wagon become the focal point of Robert Adams’ photograph, *Pikes Peak Park, Colorado Springs* from his series *The New West* (Figure 1). Located in the middle ground, drenched in the dark shadow of a newly erected home, the child takes up barely one square centimeter of the image. In the foreground, two houses are shown -- one cast in a dark shadow and the other completely illuminated -- and the space between them opens up like a theater set with the child as the central character. The middle ground quickly collapses into the background as sea of tract houses and rooftops stretch into the distance. A row of power lines abruptly separates the houses and the sky. Hanging listlessly above the homes, puffy clouds fill up the top third of the frame. Every figure in the photograph is sharply in focus and a rich tonal range extends from dark blacks of the shadows to the brightest whites, but still allows for the tiniest details to come through. The composition of the photograph is perfectly balanced as it frames the child in the middle of the neighborhood cul-de-sac. Even the contrasting colors of the rooftops and walls of the houses create a pattern of harmony. In fact the only inharmonious detail of the images is the sharp juxtaposition between the tract homes and the sky.

As always with Robert Adams’ work, one is struck by the extreme contrast of beauty and degradation. His photographs are beautifully composed with the rich tonal range that indicates his mastery of the medium. However, the subject matter
of Adams’ photographs is typically far from gorgeous, in fact one might consider it unsightly. In the genre of landscape photography, Robert Adams appears to be oscillating between the mastery of predecessors such as Ansel Adams and the vernacular address of contemporary counterparts like Lewis Baltz. Maintaining the formal rigor developed by Ansel Adams and his Group f/64, Robert Adams turns away from traditional landscape subject matter and focuses on the banal and mundane locales of everyday life in the American West. The tension created in his images, between formal beauty and "ugly" subject matter, cause viewers to pause and look more closely at the photographs. What are we to make of Adams’ photographs of the man-altered landscape of Denver?¹ This thesis takes as its case study The New West, considering it not only as a critique on urban sprawl, but also as a critique of the genre of landscape photography of the American West. Adams' series, understood as a two-fold critique, serves as a rhetorical device meant to alter his viewers' attitudes toward the man-altered landscape and environmental degradation.

Imagery as a rhetorical device is a powerful tool that can not only maintain the status quo, but can also cause change. Within the range of rhetorical devices for positive change, art has been as a powerful critique to advocate for social change.

¹ This is a term first used in the groundbreaking 1975 exhibition, New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape. This exhibition, which included the work of Robert Adams, featured a style of landscape photography that differed from more traditional landscape photography in that it focused on how the natural landscape had been affected by human development. William Jenkins, New Topographics: Photographs of the Man-altered Landscape. Rochester: The International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975.
The notion of how art might *function* is a question that has plagued theorists and critics for quite some time. Can art serve societies in ways that do not involve only aesthetics alone, but also act to generate social change? The relationship between aesthetics and function must be clearly examined to see if these ideas are compatible. In his book *The Search for Aesthetic Meaning in the Visual Arts*, David Kenneth Holt analyzes the role of aesthetics in post-modern art. Holt defines aesthetics as:

> An outgrowth of the ancient philosophy of the beautiful inherited from classic times through the Renaissance. The study of art under a branch of philosophy called Aesthetics can be thought of as an attempt by eighteenth-century philosophers to "rationalize" art but also to acknowledge its autonomy... It was this aspect of reason, its inability to illuminate feeling, that promoted the creation of philosophical aesthetics.²

This definition of aesthetics demonstrates how art’s ability to create feeling was considered opposite of reason in western Enlightenment thought. Therefore, if art is the opposite of reason it cannot perform a function. Holt argues that, “all works can function as rhetoric and yet remain primarily aesthetic objects.”³ Nevertheless, while Holt makes the case for the coexistence of function and aesthetics, he also argues that art is too ambiguous to put forth a deliberate political message and that art that is created to perpetuate social change is also too ambiguous to achieve its

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goals, because a viewer may take away readings other than those advanced by the artists.

This thesis will begin by analyzing Adams’ series, *The New West*. The first chapter of this thesis seeks to gain a greater understanding of Adams’ series as a new model in landscape photography that criticizes the traditional landscape genre—a style that mythologizes the American West as was done by photographers like Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams. The work also criticizes the uncontrolled sprawl of suburban development and its impact on the natural landscape. Not only will Adams’ photographs be addressed, but also the texts by Adams that accompany the photographs throughout the book. Following a thorough examination of the works, the book itself, as a type of exhibition format, will be examined; Adams’ penchant for publishing his works in monographs is significant to the reception of his work.

In Chapter Two a historical context will be established that examines Adams’ role in the genre of romantic landscape representations and environmentalism in photography starting in the 1850’s. A thorough examination of landscape representations, particularly of the American West from the nineteenth century to the present will be necessary to understand Adams’ place in that history. After establishing this history, a look into the history and definition of romanticism and its impact on photographic representations will situate Adams’ emergence in relation to the landscape photography movement in the West. Throughout this historical analysis Adams will be compared to various landscape photographers including, but not limited to, his contemporaries Lewis Baltz and Steven Shore, in
addition to fellow environmentally conscious photographers, Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams, in order to situate Robert Adams within the landscape photography history of the American West.

Adams’ recent retrospective, organized by the Yale University Art Gallery and nominated for the Prix-Pictect, a global award for photography and sustainability, has brought much needed attention to Adams and to ever growing concerns about the environment. The retrospective has created the perfect timing for a critical look at the art/activist issue raised by the images.

Robert Adams was born May 8, 1937 in Orange, New Jersey, but due to his health problems his family moved to Denver in 1952. In 1955 Adams began his undergraduate studies at the University of Boulder, but only stayed for one year; this is also the year that his sister gave him a copy of Edward Steichen’s, *The Family of Man*, which sparked his interest in photography. After his year at the University of Boulder, Adams moved to California and enrolled at the University of Redlands where he stayed for three years and earned his bachelor’s degree in English. Immediately after graduating he began graduate studies in English at the University of Southern California. In 1962, he moved back to Colorado and began a position as an assistant professor at the University of Colorado in the English department. Upon returning to Colorado, Adams felt that the Denver area had become too much like Southern California, an area that had been environmentally degraded by development and sprawl.
His return to Colorado and his disappointment with the way the landscape had been altered caused Adams to seek an outlet for his frustrations. In 1963 he started taking photographs, all black and white, and mostly of architecture and nature. The following year Adams read complete sets of the photographic journals Camera Work and Aperture as a way to educate himself about photography. It is also around this time that Myron Wood, a professional photographer, started teaching Adams about photographic techniques. Between 1965 and 1968 Adams received his Ph.D. in English from USC and began photographing more prolifically, submitting his work unsuccessfully to publications and exhibitions. In 1969, Adams met John Szarkowski and the Museum of Modern Art in New York bought four of his prints. Szarkowski recognized his unique approach to landscape photography and featured Adams's work in the 1971 exhibition, Photographs by Robert Adams and Emmet Gowin at MOMA, and in 1973, Adams was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. In 1975 Adams was included in the groundbreaking exhibition New Topographics: Photographs of the Man-Altered Landscape at George Eastman House – although it would not be regarded as a defining exhibition for photography for many years. Over the next thirty-five years, Adams continued to make and exhibit his work, publishing over thirty monographs. Throughout this time, Adams and his wife Kirsten also fought for many environmental causes around Denver and in Oregon, where they now live.4

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4 This biographical information was found on the website http://artgallery.yale.edu/adams/landing.php which was designed in conjunction
Scholarship on Adams is quite limited; he is seldom discussed outside of the New Topographics circle. This thesis will be one of the first scholarly and critical texts written about his work, one that aims to explore Adams’ engagement with environmental concerns, a field with which the other New Topographics artists are not commonly associated. In the introductory essay for *New Topographics*, an exhibition and catalog collaboratively produced by George Eastman House and the Creative Center of Photography, Brit Salvesen speculates that artists like Robert Adams and the other New Topographics photographers, whose photographs did not fit into the conventional ideas of what landscape photography was "supposed" to look like, deterring scholarship. She writes in the introduction to *New Topographics*, "Recognizing and identifying the subjects was not difficult; reading and interpreting them was. Even today, the works offer cool resistance." Adding to the difficult nature of the photographs themselves, Robert Adams has taken to writing prolifically about photography and about his own work. His writings will be used as one vantage point to explore his work, but the works themselves, outside of the texts, will examined at great length.

with, *The Place We Live*, a retrospective of Adam’s work organized by the Yale University Art Gallery. Joshua Choung, Associate Curator of Photographs and Digital Media, and Jock Reynolds, the Henry J. Heinz II Director, both of the Yale University Art Gallery are responsible for the organization of this retrospective, the accompanying catalog and website. Sincere thanks to Joshua Choung and the Yale University Art Gallery for their assistance in the research of this thesis.

Adams’ texts come from two different sources: a plethora of monographs printed over the course of his career and two collections of essays, *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values*, published in 1981 by Aperture, and *Why People Photograph: Selected Essays and Reviews*, published in 1994, also by Aperture. *Beauty in Photography* examines Adams’ own personal choices and techniques while photographing and also examines the work of Minor White, Frank Gohlke and C.A. Hickman. *Why People Photograph* looks into information that can help amateurs to photograph; affords examples of successful photographers such as Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Dorthea Lange and Eugène Atget; and describes working conditions. In his monographs, Adams uses the text, specifically his introductions, to guide the reader/viewer through his thought process.

Unique to Adams’s work is the mode in which one is meant to experience it: he prefers to exhibit his work in book format (although his work has also been mounted in many exhibitions). For the majority of his career, Adams produced his photographs as 4x6 and 5x7 prints, rarely larger, making them the ideal scale for a book. These small, intimate pictures force the viewer to get up close and thoroughly examine the images, a form of viewing facilitated by the book format. Viewing photographs in a book offers an intimate experience not possible in a museum or gallery. A book as a portable object allows the reader to take the entire series of photographs and experience them in any environment. Additionally, the sequential

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nature of a book reinforces a narrative that might not be evident in an exhibition. For Adams, the book is significant because it allows him to exert a certain amount of control over how is work is experienced. The book format also provides a way for Adam to insert his own writings into the viewers’ experience. This issue of the photographic book will be further explored in Chapter One as part of an in-depth analysis of the works from The New West series.

Adams is not only specific about the way in which his viewers experience his photographs, he is also meticulous in the creation of them. Through careful composition and use of the zone system developed by fellow environmental activist photographer Ansel Adams (no relation), Adams has created a formalist photograph in the tradition of the f64 photographers. When discussing how he achieves his goals in photography, he cites Edward Weston: "What he [Edward Weston] appears to have meant [by stating good composition was "the strongest way of seeing"] was that a photographer wants Form, an unarguably right relationship of shapes, a visual stability in which all components are equally important." 7 As an admirer of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, Robert Adams utilizes their theories in his work from the rich tonal range of the Colorado landscape, to the dynamic, yet balanced compositions of his suburban developments. These formal goals Robert Adams can only be accomplished if Adams masters every aspect of the images' making. In The New West, Adams expresses the extent of his control over the images as he captures

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a landscape that is in the process of being destroyed by uncontrolled development. Not only is there a tension in the photograph between the natural landscape and the evidence of human invasion, but there is also a tension between the rigorous formal techniques that create beautiful photographs and the dull, everyday subject matter. Robert Adams seeks to combine aesthetics and function in The New West as a way to provide a critique of the mythology of the American West by destabilizing the traditional genre of landscape representation through documenting uncontrolled sprawl.
Chapter One- Robert Adams and *The New West*

The American West has been mythologized as a place of newness, a land of great opportunity, and a site of untamed beauty since the "discovery" of the western United States by Europeans. The Spanish explorers of the sixteenth century and the pioneers and developers of Manifest Destiny seized the opportunity to utilize the resources of this new land of plenty. These diverse groups of people between the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries saw the American West as unclaimed territory, ripe and ready for their settlement - but how do we see the American West now? Does it still seem new or wild or free? The contemporary American West of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries still has its rugged mountains, vast deserts, open prairies and abundance of nature, but it also has its fair share of development. In *The New West* Robert Adams examines the consequences of this sprawl and development in and around Denver, Colorado by looking at five different geographical locations: the prairie, the suburbs, the city, the foothills and the mountains, between 1968-1974.

*The New West* documents this landscape in its entirety, including the people, cars, and garbage – every aspect that makes up the unique landscape in and around Denver. In this series, Adams photographs what is now "new" about the West: the man-altered landscape. Although Adams takes a turn away from the sweeping views of the natural sites previously photographed by his predecessors, he still photographs in a very similar formalist manner. The relationship between the
subject matter and the style in which Adams photographs will be analyzed in this chapter in addition to Adams’ writings that accompany the works. Not only is there a tension in the photographs between the natural landscape and the evidence of human invasion, but there is also a tension between natural space and mode of photography that is totally constructed. While the object of the photograph cannot be controlled in reality, Adams has controlled every aspect of how this image is going to be recorded. Through his strict formal techniques, Adams has created perfectly composed images with rich tonal ranges that result in gorgeous images. The way these images have been presented, in the form of photographic books will also be explored, to add further context to the series.

The New West

Adams’ series The New West marks a subtle turn from his earlier work in that he transitions from documenting the landscape to incorporating social critique into his photographs, namely, a concern for the repercussions of urban sprawl. This series, comprised of 55 photographs, was photographed between 1968 - 1974 and documents the sprawl occurring outside of Denver, Colorado. Adams photographs the physical landscape, the people, the interiors of grocery stores, the garbage and everything that makes up the physical environment. "My goal was not only to record the animate and inanimate fragments," he has claimed, "but also to show the
totality, the landscape." Adams was trying to change the idea of the "landscape" from merely an arrangement of physical space to a notion of "place" that encompasses all of the elements that give a place like Denver its complex and dynamic identity. This inclusive approach, comprising people, buildings, trash etc., provides the viewer with many different aspects on the landscape, and at the same time helps the viewer to better understand Adams' work.

The goal that Robert Adams has for his photographs, that is, capturing the landscape in its entirety, can, according to him, only come through if he is achieving the balance of form. For Adams, a balanced composition is the only way an artist can ensure that the viewer will see what he wants them to see.

The first image of the series (Figure 1) appears right after the title page and it does not include a title. Adams has layered the foreground, middleground and background of this image in a way that not only creates depth of field, but also divides the photograph in horizontal thirds. On the left side of the foreground, a street sign appears on a sidewalk corner demarcating the intersection of Querida Dr. and De Cortez. The intersection appears to be in suburban neighborhood - there are wood fencing and tract homes in the middleground. Suspended above the homes are power lines strung from a power pole with a transformer making dark grooves in the center of photograph. As in many Adams' photographs, the sky is a deep gray and contrasts with puffy white clouds. The soft, puffy clouds provide a harsh

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juxtaposition with the rigid power lines just below them and the asphalt just below the wires. Every small detail from the screens on the windows to the veins in the wooden slabs of the fences is made noticeable through Adams’ meticulous exposure and development process. The bright Colorado sunlight is felt through the highlighted asphalt, which is so brilliant it almost hurts the viewer’s eyes. Large clouds on the right side of the photograph balance the street sign and power pole that occupy the left side of the photograph.

This quintessential example of Adams’ work sets the stage for the entire series. In this image, the subject matter, a typical street corner in any suburban development, is captured in such an exacting way that ordinary objects of everyday life, such as the wooden fence and the power lines, become elevated and aestheticized. The clouds, the gravel, the roof shingles and every other element in the photograph are meticulously recorded and arranged in such a way that the subject matter takes on a sense of importance. The care that Adams put into creating this single photograph is evident in the techniques used for both capturing the images and developing the photograph. Adams’ process leads the viewer to believe that everything in this image is important, every detail has a role and that through the Colorado sunlight, everything can make beautiful.
Opposite the image, Adams has included a quote from Richard Willbur’s poem, *Junk*:

... things themselves
   in thoughtless honor
Have kept composure,
   like captives who would not
Talk under torture.⁹

This poem, written in 1961, speaks of junk that has been cast off because it was intentionally made to be flimsy, unable to withstand continued use, much like the acres of tract homes that were designed to be efficiently built, rather than for durability. With the addition of this text, the viewer/reader can see how other artists were becoming concerned with the material culture arising in postwar America. These four lines from the poem also further contextualize Adams’ work by claiming that it is not these "things" that are the issue, but the people who make, buy and sell these "things," and what they do with them when they are done. The houses, power lines, garbage, signs and other things in the landscape have kept their composure.

*The New West* was originally published in 1974 by Colorado Associated University Press, republished in 2000 by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, and reissued in a third version by Aperture in 2008. The original version included an essay by John Szarkowski, which is included in both reproductions. In his foreword Szarkowski waxes philosophical about the relationship between man and

nature. He writes about the paradoxical relationship people have with the
landscape in that they do not value the landscape in which they live, but put fences
around national parks to preserve the landscapes in which no one resides. When
discussing Adams and his work, Szarkowski focuses on how Adams transforms
these banal landscapes into something important, something that needs attention.
He concludes the foreword with:

Though Robert Adams' book assumes no moral postures, it does have
a moral. Its moral is that the landscape is, for us, the place we live. If
we have used it badly, we cannot therefore scorn it, without scorning
ourselves. If we have abused it, broken its health, and erected upon it
memorials to our ignorance, it is still our place, and before we can
proceed we must learn to love it.\(^{11}\)

Szarkowski's phrase, "the place we live," would in 2011 become the title for Adams' retroactive, and it perfectly labels the subject of Adams' work. Instead of focusing
on the beautifully preserved national parks, Adams wants his viewers to look at the
places in which they actually live and to understand the ramifications of their
choices.

In the 2000 edition, Heinz Liesbrock includes an essay that focuses on the
idea or mythology of the West and where Adams' work fits within that framework.
The West had always been "new," whether it was perceived as such by English
immigrants seeking religious freedom west of the Atlantic or fashioned as such by
the idea of Manifest Destiny that took root in American culture in the nineteenth

\(^{10}\) John Szarkowski, "Foreword," in The New West: Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 1974), ix.
\(^{11}\) Ibid, xi.
century. The West, in many of its different myths, was always a promise of something new, a source of freedom that would, however, in some cases, disappoint. According to Liesbrock, "'The New West' takes up this unique connection between nature and idea which characterizes the concept of the West... Adams’s theme is the transformation of the old West into the one-dimensional America of the present." 12

After Szarkowski’s foreword, Adams provides his introduction to the series:

"The first uplift of the Rocky Mountains, the Front Range, revealed to nineteenth century pioneers the grandeur of the American West, and established the problem of how to respond to it. Nearly everyone thought the geography amazing; Pike described it in 1806 as "sublime', and Kathryn Lee Bates eventually wrote "America the Beautiful" from the top of the peak he discovered. Nonetheless, as a practical mater most people hoped to alter an exploit the region.

The mountains still synopsize the frontier, though our expectations have matured and the significance of the land has changed- we want to live with it harmoniously. This may seem a tame goal when compared to that of our forbearers, but in fact the struggle is desperate because it is also to live with ourselves, against our own creation, the city, and the disgust and nihilism it breeds.

Many have asked, pointing incredulously toward a sweep of track homes and billboards, why picture that? The question sounds simple, but it implies a difficult issue- why open our eyes anywhere but in undamaged places like national parks?

One reason is, of course, we do not live in parks, that we need to improve things at home, and that to do it we have to see the facts without blinking. We need to watch, for example, as an old woman, alone, is forced to carry her groceries in August over a fifty acre parking lot; then we know, safe from the comforting lies of profiteers, that we must begin again. Arthur Dove, the painter, was right: We have not yet made shoes that fit

like sand
Nor clothes that fit like water
Nor thoughts that lift like air
There is much to be done..."

Paradoxically, however, we also need to see the whole geography, natural and man-made to experience a peace; all land, no matter what has happened to it, has over it a grace, an absolute persistent beauty.

The subject of these pictures is, in this sense, not tract homes or freeways but the source of all Form, light. The Front Range is astonishing because it is overspread with light of such richness that banality is impossible. Even subdivisions, which we hate for the obscenity of the speculator’s greed, are at certain times of day transformed to dry, cold brilliance.

Towns, many now suggest, are intrusions on sacred landscapes, and who can deny it, looking at the squalor we have laid across America? But even as we see the harm of our own work and determine to correct it, we also see that nothing can, in the last analysis intrude. Nothing permanently diminished the affirmation of the sun. Pictures remind us of this, so that we are able to say with the poet Theodore Roethke, ‘Be with me, Whitman, make of catalogues; For the world invades me again.” 13

This introduction provides the viewer/reader with a insight into Adams’ thought process when he was photographing the series and choosing what images to include in the book. Relating his introduction to the Wilbur poem, Adams has chosen not to make the things themselves his subject, but rather the composure that they have been able to maintain in the Colorado sunlight. Adams is encouraging his viewer/readers to look at the entire landscape – the natural and the manmade – to see that the power of the natural world will always supersede anything that man can do. Like Ansel Adams and Carleton Watkins, Robert Adams is still fascinated by

the raw beauty and power of nature in the American West. But unlike his predecessors, Robert Adams urges his viewers to look at the environments in which they live as opposed to national parks to find this beauty. In this process, however, he aestheticizes and romanticizes the very banal subject matter that he is lamenting.

**Prairie**

The first chapter of *The New West* explores the prairie around Denver along Interstate 25. In fact, five out of the nine images in the chapter are titled *Along Interstate 25*. Adams begins the chapter by writing, "The outlaying plains are still verdant, with ranges of grass to scan, and infrequent but lovely trees by which to measure space. Nearer the mountains and cities, these give way."14 Instead of trees, power lines and "For Sale" signs punctuate the landscape. Extensive miles of highway and guardrails disappear outside of the frames of the images. Adams structures the book this way, beginning with the prairie and moving from east to west throughout the book.

The first image titled "Along Interstate 25" (Figure 4) features a small metal sign, the lettering bleached by the sun, in the foreground of a vast expanse of land. The middle-ground is full of scrub and prairie grass, while the background shows a faint glimpse of the Rocky Mountain Range and a wide-open sky that takes up about one third of the composition, with only a small cloud in the top right corner. In this image, the bright Colorado sunlight illuminates everything including the decrepit

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sign, which casts a nearly solid black shadow on the ground. In the next image titled "Along Interstate 25" (figure 5), a similar composition and content matter are featured. A stretch of land dotted with bushes and covered in prairie grass is being invaded by human presence, as is the sky, which takes up over half of the composition. In the previous image there was only one small sign, but in this image there is a large for sale sign, as well as two poles strung with lines (most likely for telephone service). The last image titled "Along Interstate 25" (Figure 9) shows quite a bit more development than the other photographs. Instead of miles of open prairie, the foreground is the highway and the middle ground is a gas station and cafe, complete with large signs and more telephone poles. In the distant background, the Rocky Mountains are a faint gray and again, the huge sky takes up over a third of the image. In all of these images, Adams meticulously documents every detail of the landscape whether natural or manmade, placing equal importance on all of the figures. In “Along Interstate 25” (Figure 9), the gas station and cafe are given much more prominence in the photograph than the mountains. By focusing on the human development and aestheticizing it through his formal techniques, the critique of development loses its impact.

The image "Pikes Peak, Colorado Spring, and the Highway from the Prairie" (Figure 10) provides a juxtaposition between the natural landscape surrounding the edge of the city and encroaching human development. Captured within the background of the image are the monumental Rocky Mountains, capped with snow and with dark, ominous clouds in the sky. The background takes up
nearly half of the image and shows the imposing natural elements that surround the human development. The middleground and foreground blend seamlessly together and depict the vast horizontal sprawl of highways, buildings and power lines. All of the human activity is dwarfed by the mountain range, but Adams has also captured human presence meticulously with the tiniest of details, from roadside signs to telephone wires. The horizon line cuts the image nearly in half and creates a definite boundary between the mountains and the city. While the sprawl is documented with significant attention to detail, the mountain range appears to be veiled in some sort of mist. The two sections could almost be from different images, they contrast so much with one another. This contrast creates a separation between the natural and the manmade. While the mountains are cloaked in mist and dark clouds hang overhead, the highway and surrounding areas are lit with the strong Colorado sun. Details of chain link fences and trailers are illuminated and made to seem very important. By capturing the sprawl illuminated by the rich light source, the ugly and mundane become aestheticized. Through this aestheticization the sprawl becomes just as beautiful and important as the Rocky Mountain range in the background, which seems counter-productive to his work in its purported function as social critique.
Tracts and Mobile Homes

The next chapter in *The New West* moves geographically from the mostly undeveloped prairie in the east into the suburbs surrounding the city. Writing about this chapter, Adams states:

A strip city, largely suburban, is evolving along from the Front Range from Wyoming to New Mexico. Development has been anarchic, buildings is monotonous, and life inside is frozen by anonymity and loneliness. Few of the new houses will stand in fifty years; linoleum buckles on counter tops, and unseasoned lumber twists walls out of plumb before the first occupants arrive. Visible picture windows, however, are fragments of open sky and long views that obscurely make radiant even what frightens us.¹⁵

The 1960s development of the suburbs grew at an exponential rate that was neither well planned nor environmentally friendly. While Adams’ work as a whole describes the environmental degradation caused by human development, this chapter in *The New West* specifically focuses on how this exponential growth has lead to an unfulfilling lifestyle for the inhabitants. The images in this chapter are arranged in a way that appears to the viewer as chronological, from the beginning stages of construction to the expansive vistas of subdivisions that engulf the landscape. Within this chronological narrative, images of the lonely, isolated life experienced by many of these inhabitants become the subject of his landscapes.

"Basement for a tract house. Colorado Springs" (Figure 11) features a worker digging a large hole in the ground. Surrounding the hole are various tools, including a ladder, and a pile of rocks. The middleground of the image is a stretch of

undeveloped land and in the background a group of houses is barely visible on the right. In the far background, the ever-present Rocky Mountains stretch from one edge of the frame to the other. Although the worker is preparing to build a house in a community that will foster hundreds of people, at the moment the photograph was taken he was alone and almost appears to be a gravedigger. Many of the photographs in this chapter either have no people present (although the images are of human development) or only one person featured. By choosing to minimize the number of actual people in the images, Adams creates a sense of loneliness and despair in this chapter. The tract homes are brand new, but without the presence of the inhabitants, the developments appear to be ghost towns. The sadness portrayed in these images, delivered in the form of fine art photography, evokes a sense of romanticism, and by romanticizing this landscape, Adams ignores the facts and realities of the lifestyles of those who populate tract homes. Adams is projecting his own feelings about encroaching development but ignores the feelings of the people who live in that place.

"Colorado Springs" (Figure 19) is an image that is at once a portrait and a landscape of a woman in her home in a newly built suburban tract home and portrays the loneliness and anonymity mentioned by Adams in the introduction to the chapter. The foreground features a perfectly manicured lawn with a paved walkway leading up to the front door. The middle ground depicts the brick facade of the house, the front door with its miniscule porch, and a large picture window. This window into the home frames the figure of a woman standing in front of another
window. Her silhouette creates an effect of isolation and anonymity. Adams gives her an identity: the depressed housewife alone in her home. In this photograph, Adams’ romanticization of his subjects becomes apparent by using compositional techniques to frame his subjects in a way that appeals to his viewer’s emotions. The viewer of this photograph is not given any information about the woman besides what Adams wants the viewer to see: his romanticized idea of her life.

The City

Moving from the outskirts of the suburbs and farther west, the next chapter focuses on the city of Denver. In the introduction Adams writes:

Here no expediency is forbidden. A new house is bulldozed to make room for a trailer agency; sidewalks are lost when the street is widened; shrubs die in the smog and are replaced with gravel. Read the eschatological chaos of signs.16

In the photographs of the city, the natural landscape almost completely disappears and is replaced with streets, billboards, parking lots and high-rises. In the images of the suburbs, the natural landscape was still evident in the sweeping vistas, but in the city the sweeping vistas are all parking lots.

"Federal Boulevard, Denver" (Figure 36) depicts an elderly woman crossing a parking lot. The foreground is an empty expanse of asphalt with the shadow of a light pole stretching diagonally across the bottom half of the image. Almost directly in the center of image, underneath the gas station portico, an elderly woman carries

a paper bag of groceries in one hand and a newspaper in her other hand. The background is a parking lot with a sea of cars, light poles and buildings. Although the image is filled with objects, the woman is completely alone and isolated. This imagery is similar to that of Adams’s photographs of the suburbs. Although the spaces are crowded and filled with cars, streets, and buildings, the people living in these areas are depicted as solitary. As in the photograph of the woman in her home, Adams has used his formal techniques to romanticize this woman carrying her groceries. The gas station portico perfectly frames her within the photograph, focusing all the viewer's attention on her figure. The bright Colorado sunlight creates deep lines in her wrinkled face that exaggerate her age. By isolating her in the frame and creating this drama, Adams is dramatizing her walk to her car, and through this drama of human suffering, Adams again plays on the viewers’ emotions to create a story of hardship that may not in fact exist.

**Foothills**

The next chapter moves out of the city to the foothills, continuing west toward the Rocky Mountain range:

"Windswept, stony, and bright, the foothills are sometimes a last stop for travelers before they leave the plains on their way west. As if to deepen reflection, we have scattered through the mesas and ridges a thing clutter- an imitation cliff dwelling, an atomic bomb plant, monuments to Buffalo Bill and Will Rogers…"17

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17 *Ibid*, 89.
Here, as in the prairie, development is significantly less, but still apparent. Carved into the foothills are highways dotted with motels, power lines and other signs of the autoscape. Once more, Adams juxtaposes the natural wild landscape with banal human development.

"Outdoor theater and Cheyenne Mountain" (Figure 43) is an image from this chapter that shows this juxtaposition. In the foreground, an expansive parking lot for the drive-in theater is punctuated with speakers for the movie. Adams repeatedly uses a motif of emphatic foregrounds that shows the audience the amount of space that all of this “stuff” - whether, it’s a parking lot, drive in theater, or mobile park - takes up. In the middle ground the movie screen is dwarfed by the enormous sky, yet the movie screen lines up almost perfectly with the distant mountain range. Yet the mountains are in the background, and like all elements in the image, they too are dwarfed by the sky. Adams has chosen to take this image during the day, at a time when the drive-in is deserted. Drive-in movie theaters serve no purpose during the daytime, yet they still take up the same amount of space as night – to no purpose. This uselessness generates a romantic quality, rendering the drive-in movie theater as a romantic ruin.

Mountains

The final chapter of the book explores the mountains, which is as far west the series goes. This chapter has the fewest number of images and shows the least amount of development. Adams writes:
William Henry Jackson, the best known photographer of the West, made arrangements in 1879 to settle in Denver. 'I signed a lease for the second floor [of a building under construction], drew plans for the skylight,... and made a beeline for the mountains. My new studio wouldn't be ready until September, and there certainly was no sense in sticking around town. Many living by the Front Range today would understand these sentiments. Though the mountains are no longer wild, they still dwarf us and thereby give us courage to look at our mistakes—expressways, Tyrolean villages, and jeep roads. Such things shame us, but they cannot outlast the rock; in sunlight they are even, for a moment, like trees.\(^{18}\)

The last image of the chapter and of the book is "Pioneer cemetery: Near Empire." (Figure 56) In the foreground there is a cemetery with headstones and monuments irregularly placed. There appears to be a patch of sun illuminating the cemetery, which is juxtaposed with the dark shadow of the mountain. Almost two thirds of the mountain is covered in this shadow, but the Colorado sun illuminates the top third. Patchy clouds fill the sky. Ruins or signs of decay are hallmarks of romantic imagery, typically invoking signs of death. Likewise cemeteries raise thoughts of death, which in the case of \textit{The New West} could be a reference to the death of the natural landscape. Adams at once romanticizes the death of the natural landscape, and aestheticizes it with the brilliant Colorado sunlight.

\textbf{The Photographic Book}

In contrast to traditional landscape photography, Robert Adams chose to photograph \textit{The New West} in a relatively small format. The images are typically no

\(^{18}\text{Ibid, 113.}\)
larger than six inches on each side. What is also different in his approach to photographing the landscape is that he is using a square format as opposed to what is traditionally called "landscape" orientation. These small prints are ideal for publishing in a book, not putting in an exhibition. By utilizing the photographic book, Adams tapped into a format that would allow him to deliver his criticisms in a more controlled way than in an exhibition. Photographic books became popular in the 1960s and 70s as artists "came at photography from outside its tradition, employing it for characteristics it shared with other pop phenomena: multiplicity, seriality, ubiquitousness and ephemerality."\(^{19}\) The serial quality of Adams photographs function well as a book because the subtle changes as he moves from east to west, prairie to mountain, are emphasized in the act of reading from left to right, an aspect that is much less guaranteed in an exhibition. Additionally, the photographic book is a superior form of dissemination for its wide distribution: Adams' books were not released in limited quantities. Adams' books are were and are still affordable and accessible, which definitely separates his work from artists like Ansel Adams. Ansel Adams' prints were more suited for exhibition and when he did publish a book, for example *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail*, it was very expensive and produced in a limited quantity.

Reception

Reception of *The New West* was by all accounts positive. Fellow *New Topographics* photographer, Lewis Baltz, greatly admired the photographs. What is initially surprising about Baltz’s review is that he praises Adams’s skills as a documentary photographer. He argues that Adams’ work is uninflected and direct, yet manages to capture "the strange and glacial beauty that, in spite of everything, still resides in the land." Baltz does not problematize the relationship between documentary, which is associated with objectivity, and the presence of beauty, which is associated with subjectivity. It has been argued throughout this chapter that Adams’ critique on urban sprawl is complicated by his pursuit of beauty in his photographs. Similarly, Beaumont Newhall’s critique of *The New West* finds no problem with Adams combining the documentary and the personal in the series and states, "Adams has produced a collection of photographs that is at once a historical record of uncontrolled blight upon the face of the land and the personal interpretation of the look and the feel of a place." Both of these reviewers speak of intention, but neither mentions outright the role of intention or the question of environmental activism.

The New West as a book and as a series of photographs attempts to serve as a twofold critique: a social critique on the degraded landscape and a critique on

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traditional landscape photography that ignores the places where people actually live. Instead of admiring the national parks, the work claims, we should start focusing on the uncontrollable sprawl that is dominating the landscape. Adams’ carefully composed photographs with their near perfect tonal range utilize the pure Colorado light to create beautiful images of the landscape. These images are beautiful in every aspect and there lies the problem. By aestheticizing and romanticizing the decaying landscape, Adams’ critique of the man-altered landscape and critique of the landscape genre that mythologizes the American West is lost.
Chapter Two- The Romantic Landscape of the American West and Ecocriticism in Photography

Perception of the American West has been greatly shaped by landscape photography beginning with early landscape photographers, such Carleton Watkins and Timothy O’Sullivan. Out of this early photography, a romanticized version of an unspoiled and rugged landscape was born. In the first half the twentieth century, Ansel Adams continued this romanticized and idealized version of the landscape through a photographic practice that focused mainly on landscapes that had not yet been corrupted by man. These romanticized and idealized versions of the landscape perpetuated a myth about the West that ignored the people living in the spaces (indigenous and new settlers) and evidence of human development such as buildings, roads, and eventually, automobiles and oil wells. Robert Adams attempts to destabilize the myth of the West perpetuated by photographers like Watkins and Ansel Adams by turning his camera away from pristine locales and towards developed areas. Instead of cropping out people or roads, he includes everything that makes up the man-altered landscape -- including less than beautiful and less than ideal subjects.

Robert Adams’ series, The New West, acts a two-fold critique of the myth of the American West: first, it is a critique of the traditional landscape photography that endorses this myth and second, it is a critique of the uncontrolled sprawl perpetuated by humans on the natural landscape. This chapter of the thesis analyzes Robert Adams’ place in the history of environmentally concerned
photography by comparing him with Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams, two figures whose works were used to lobby congress to declare certain regions of the western United States as national parks. Although Adams shifts his camera away from these untouched national parks to show the environmental consequences of uncontrolled urban sprawl, he still falls victim to romanticization and idealization like Ansel Adams and Carleton Watkins, undermining his own critique.

First, landscape representation as a genre in art history will be theoretically and historically explored in order to locate Robert Adams within ever-evolving ideas of landscape. Representations of the American west from the 1850s to the present will be addressed, with a focus primarily on photography. Understanding the rich theoretical and historical context that Adams is working through, from and against will be important to understanding the landscape and environmental concerns of the 1960s and 70s - as well as the various reactions to these ideologies. Adams will be compared to several other photographers from the *New Topographics* exhibition in order to explain these different reactions.

After comparing Robert Adams and his practice with his contemporaries during the late 1960s and early 70s, the role of environmentalism as a scientific and artistic practice will be examined. Environmentalism and romanticism have a longstanding connection rooted in literature and the visual arts. Romanticism, as a rejection of the Enlightenment, turned to irrational thought as a source of humanity, inspiring writers and artists of the day. Rousseau, for example, rejected the contemporary state of man and proposed ideas advocating the benefits of a pre-
agricultural society.\textsuperscript{22} These ideas would cause individuals during this time period to evaluate the role between man and nature, and to consider how man's removal from nature had caused corruption for both. These ideas would rise again in the context of environmental concerns emerging in the post war period. Just as landscape representations of the Romantic period started to focus on the picturesque, so did landscape photography of the post war period, specifically in the work of Robert Adams. This is so in spite of the fact that Adams moved away from the sublime subject matter of his predecessor Ansel Adams, and focused instead on the vernacular landscape. Robert Adams’ picturesque photographs of Denver embody characteristics very like Constable's paintings, for example, the inclusion of man-made structures as intrusions into the natural landscape. For this analysis, ecocriticism, a study that combines literature and environmental studies, will be central to positioning the role of environmentally concerned photography. Historical and theoretical information on landscape representation, Romanticism and ecocriticism will then be synthesized into comparison of Adams’ series with the work of Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams, in order to position Adams within the history of ecocritical photography.

Landscape as Artistic Genre

"Landscape study is a companion of that form of social history which seeks to understand the routine lives of ordinary people," according to D.W. Menig in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*. When a landscape is studied either in its physical manifestation, in a photograph, painting or other form, a study of the culture that inhabits it is also formed. The term landscape itself is fraught with complication because of its many definitions and origins. John Brinckerhoff Jackson began his quest of what is meant by the term and the idea. "landscape" by discussing the differences between the vernacular concept as understood by peasants, and the view of the aristocracy in feudal Europe. According to Jackson, the aristocratic concept of physical space was marked by boundaries created through legal action of some sort, whereas for peasants landscape was described as small bits of land that never settled into a permanent state. Brinckerhoff names this medieval structure "Landscape One." "Landscape Two" is the idea of landscape that comes about during the Renaissance, which is about the sanctity of place, and which encouraged people to settle and be part of a community. "Landscape Three" occurs in contemporary America, and oscillates between the positions of Landscape One and Landscape Two. This oscillation produces a vernacular landscape that

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24 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Have: Yale University Press, 1984), 149.
25 Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, 152.
embodies the American identity as one that desires permanence, but that in the end favors mobility.

This theory can be directly applied to The New West through Adams’ representation of new development. Settlement of the American West and the eventual development of the suburbs grew out of a desire for a home to call one’s own (permanence), but the cheaply made tract homes are not meant to withstand a long period of time causing owners to find other homes (mobility). Although Adams photographed much of Denver and the surrounding regions, the focus of the series appears to be the uncontrolable sprawl and subsequent development caused by tract housing. Through his focus, aestheticization and romanticization of these developments, the tract home communities and mobile home parks become monuments in the landscape. Adams gives these mundane subjects importance by the way he photographs them. In Discovering the Vernacular Landscape, Jackson writes:

We are inclined in America to think that the value of monuments is simply to remind us of origins. They are much more valuable as reminders of long-range ... goals and objectives and principles. As such even the least sightly of monuments gives a landscape beauty and dignity and keeps the collective memory alive.26

These unsightly monuments that Jackson refers to are "the drive-in fast food establishments that torn down after a year and motels abandoned when the highway moves." 27 For Adams, these developments are monuments that are

26 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, Discovering the Vernacular Landscape, 152
27 Ibid, 155.
reminders of American goals: to utilize natural resources for gain regardless of the cost.

*New Subvisions. Arvada.* (Figure 15) documents the monuments of the contemporary American landscape. Subsumed by the expansive landscape, a vast development of tract homes occupies the middle ground of the photograph. Isolated in the basin of a valley, this development comprises hundreds of newly constructed homes. The foreground of the photograph is filled with open land, covered in prairie grass and dotted with a few scraggly trees. Beyond the homes in the background of the photograph is the persistent Rocky Mountain Range. Taking up almost half of the photograph is the expansive Denver sky filled with wispy clouds. Pure Colorado sunlight pours down from the sky, illuminating all of the landscape, including the tract homes. By creating an image that is so meticulously captured, with sharp details and a rich tonal range, Adams gives the man-altered landscape importance, and the tract homes become the unsightly monuments that Jackson designates as vernacular. Through this process, Adams aestheticizes the man-altered landscape instead of critiquing it.

Adams was not alone in recognizing the monuments invading the natural landscape. During the 1960s and 70s, the man-altered landscape became a topic of interest for many artists, architects, writers and other socially conscious individuals. At polar opposites of the debate over the man-altered landscape were the architectural design firm Venturi Scott Brown and the writer Peter Blake. Although these individuals never engaged in direct debate, their views represent the
divergent arguments people were having at this time. Peter Blake's 1979 book, 

God's Own Junkyard: the Planned Deterioration of the American Landscape, laments the littering of the man-altered landscape with billboard signs. In the Venturi Scott Brown book, Learning From Las Vegas, the authors explore the signs and buildings along the Las Vegas Strip to come to an understanding of what architecture means to popular culture. In contrast to Blake's excoriation, they viewed the large signs that accompanied gas stations, hotels and casinos as models for producing architecture that was appealing to people.

Adams appears to be oscillating between these two positions: rejection of the man-altered landscape and the embrace of the full, developed landscape. His words reflect an attitude similar to that of Blake's (although not nearly as polemic), but his photographs reflect an attitude more in line with Venturi Scott Brown. The images pay equal respect to the natural elements of the landscape and the man-made elements. Not only do they photographs convey the bright, expansive and vibrant Colorado sky, but they give equal weight to the details in chain link fences surrounding various buildings on the highway. In the photographs, there is a balance between the natural and the man-made, and they are shown in harmony.

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One year after *The New West* was published, William Jenkins curated *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* at the George Eastman House International Museum of Film and Photography in Rochester, New York.\(^{30}\) The new way of photographing the landscape that Jenkins identified with the exhibition would have a lasting effect on landscape photography as a whole. In his introduction to the catalog, the curator writes:

> As individuals the photographers take great pains to prevent the slightest trace of judgment or opinion from entering their work... This viewpoint, which extends throughout the exhibition, is anthropological rather than critical, scientific rather an artistic.\(^{31}\)

Although objectivity may have been Jenkins’ intent in organizing the exhibition, the apoliticization of the work is problematic, specifically with regard to Adams. The artists in this exhibition are doing more than documenting the man-altered landscape; Baltz is lamenting it and Stephen Shore is celebrating it. Evidence of these attitudes can be found directly in their photographs.

Lewis Baltz’s *Alton Road at Murphy Road looking toward Newport Center*, 1974, (Figure 57) from the series *Industrial Parks* is a dismal scene depicting nondescript industrial buildings along the roadside. Baltz’s choice of tonal range is an immediate sign of his attitude toward the subject matter. The entryways and windows into the industrial buildings are completely blacked out, offering no detail

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of what lurks inside the building. The left side of the photograph features a bleak landscape with indiscriminate plants in the foreground stretching to the background, where numerous telephone or electric poles arise out of the ground and disappear into the distance. In the very far distance, hills are barely visible through the ever-present smog of Southern California. The photograph has an overall brightness emphasized by the sky, which takes up about two thirds of the image. Compositionally, Baltz uses a straightforward approach that mimics the ordered, banal industrial park. Compared to Adams, Baltz’s tonal range is flat and gray, unpunctuated by even the occasional solid black detail. Their compositions also differ in that Baltz tends to photograph his subject head-on in a more documentary manner, whereas Adams provides more dynamic compositions. The contempt for the man-altered landscape presented in Baltz’s work expresses the same polemic as Peter Blake’s. But Adams still tries to find beauty in the man-altered landscape, whereas Baltz finds no beauty and instead documents only horror.

Stephen Shore’s work is remarkably different from that of both Adams and Baltz. Not only did Shore set himself apart from other photographers of the man-altered landscape, he was a pioneer amongst them in his use of color film. By using color, banal scenes of everyday life are suddenly energized and awakened. *Main Street, Gull Lake, Saskatchewan, 1974* (Figure 58), for example, is similar in content to what one would see from Adams: an intersection that could be located anywhere in North America, featuring buildings, cars and electric poles and lines. But shot in
color, this ordinary scene is invigorated by the lush qualities of the sky, the façades of the buildings and the signage. The sky takes up nearly half of the photograph and begins as the softest blue along the horizon line, developing to rich azure as it stretches to the edge of the frame. Along the street, a salmon pink façade and red Coca Cola sign bring life to what would otherwise be a dull image. Compared to Adams’ photographs, Shore’s images are vibrant and cheerful. They also stop short of aestheticizing or romanticizing the landscape – rather, they capture it in a documentary way that allows for the beauty of things like pink facades to speak for themselves. Shore has represented the buildings and signage as something to acknowledge much in the way that Venturi and Scott Brown acknowledged the Las Vegas strip. The vernacular landscape for these artists/architects was not something to be scorned or mourned, rather, it was an entity that reflected contemporary culture.

Adams appears to be operating somewhere on the continuum between Baltz and Shore -- he is not making photographs that condemn the man-altered landscape, nor is he celebrating the man-altered landscape. The photographic techniques utilized by both Baltz and Shore reflect their attitudes toward their subject matter. Adams’ techniques, his rigorous attention to detail, tonal range and composition, aestheticize and romanticize his subjects causing his critique of landscape to break down. The manner in which Adams photographs the landscape does not reflect a critique on land use of the American West or does it critique the tradition of landscape photography of the American West.
The Romantic Landscape and Ecocriticism

Modernity and environmental awareness coincide with one another on several different levels. Romantic literature and art reacting against Enlightenment thinking started a change in the way that people thought about their relationship with nature; a symbiotic relationship was proposed, as opposed to one of domination. Romanticism was the foundation on which environmental consciousness, and eventually, environmental criticism and activism were built.\(^\text{32}\)

After the Romantics, the Transcendentalists, such as Henry David Thoreau continued to advance the idea of man and nature operating in harmony. \(^\text{33}\) By the middle of the nineteenth century in the United States, suburban homes were being marketed as a place within nature to get away from the moral and physical perils of the city. The idea of the suburban home as place of solace within nature would eventually disappear, particularly after the boom in suburban development in the post-war period. Adams' work focuses heavily on the issue of how the lives of people in suburban developments are competing with the natural environment as

\(^{32}\) For example, landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing designed American suburban villas in the 1840’s to give the residents the feeling they were alone with nature, completely outside the vices of the city. Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*. New York: Basic Books, 1987. *The Green Studies Reader: from Romanticism to Ecocriticism* also provides information on the links between romanticism and ecocriticism.


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opposed to living in it harmoniously. Environmental concerns grew out of the
desire for the bourgeois to escape the city, but in the twentieth century
environmental issues started to become relevant to the entire populace. Since the
revolution triggered by the appearance in the 1960s of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*,
environmentalism as a movement has flowed from science and philosophy into
literature and art.

By the mid 1990s, the environmentalism of the 60s and 70s had expanded to
the extent that it produced the self-reflexive and historicizing field of eco-criticism.
Two critical texts responsible for the recognition of ecocriticism as a scholarly field
were *The Ecocriticism Reader* 1996 edited by Cherryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and
Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* 1995.34 These texts provided the
links between the environmental movement and literature from the Romantic to the
present, emphasizing the relationship between humans and nature, and defining
ecocritism as "the study of explicit environmental texts by way of any scholarly
approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature
relationships in any literary text."35 Although ecocriticism did not become a
discipline until the 1990’s (predating Adams) it is a useful interpretive framework

34 Cherryl Glotfelty and Harold From, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, (Athens: University of
35 Scott Slovic, "Ecocritism: Containing Multitudes, Practising Doctrine," in *The
Green Studies Reader: from Romanticism to Ecocritism*, ed. by Lawrence Coupe, New
because it provides historical evidence of the relationship between art practice and environmentalism.

One early example of ecocriticism that predates the naming of the genre and occurs around the time that Adams starts photographing the man-altered landscape is Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden and the Pastoral Ideal in America.* In this book Marx examines the impact of industrialism on the “pastoral ideal” central to the American psyche. In his analysis of literary works by Samuel Hawthorne and Mark Twain, Marx uses examples of technology – trains and steamboats – to claim that they are destroying the bucolic image of America. Marx’s focus is not so much on the landscape itself, but how this destruction affects the American mindset.

Much like Adams, Marx acknowledges that Americans live in a continuous landscape- there is no separation between the natural and cultural landscapes. Marx writes: "The distinctive attribute of the new order is its technological power, a power that does not remain confined to the traditional boundaries of the city. It is a centrifugal force that threatens to break down, once and for all, the conventional contrast between these two styles of life." With the expression “two styles of life,” Marx is drawing attention to the disappearing division between urban and rural life, and their respective technological and natural determinants. In this example, one can see how Marx is isolating the environmental concerns of Romantic writers,

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focusing on the social implications of environmental degradation. This would become common practice for literary scholars looking at how literature determines the relationship between nature and culture.

Romanticism as genre of art encompassed many different styles of art making, to the extent that it is difficult to give the genre an exact definition. As a reaction against the Enlightenment, romantic thought shifted away from rationality and instead focused on "the primacy of imagination, the potentialities of intuition, the importance of emotions and emotional integrity, and, above all, the uniqueness and unique value of every human being in a constantly changing cosmos."\(^{38}\) This attention to emotion and imagination would be key to landscape that represented the sublime, the picturesque and the beautiful. The ideas about nature espoused by the Romantics were then carried through from landscape painting to early landscape photography of the nineteenth century. For example nineteenth century British photographers Henry Peach Robinson and Peter Henry Emerson photographed the English countryside and working class people in romantic style, albeit in different ways (Figure 59). While Robinson’s images were stiffly constructed and Emerson’s more naturalistic, both photographers sought to capture the relationship that these people had with the land. These images were not overtly activist, but their idealization of a life embedded in the land betrays a longing for a lost connection with nature and an awareness of the price paid for industrial

development that prefigures environmental activism. This is the model that will later be seen in works of activist photographers like Robert Adams.

This thesis positions Robert Adams’ series *The New West* as having borrowed from the romantic ideals of the picturesque to evoke emotion and imagination in the viewers. Human suffering and death are common themes in romantic literature and art, and are often represented in the form of picturesque vistas. In Romantic landscape paintings ruins were a recurrent motif, as well as cemeteries and other symbols evoking ideas related to death. Although in his series Adams is photographing mostly new construction, a picturesque quality is evoked by the way Adams represents the destruction of the natural environment and the suffering of the people living in these new developments. *Newly occupied tract houses. Colorado Springs* (Figure 14) is an example of one way Adams utilizes tropes of the picturesque in his series. This photograph captures a newly constructed development – so new, in fact, that there are still tractor tire impressions in the dirt in the foreground the photograph. A cul-de-sac with one car parked on the street is the main subject of the photograph, with other newly constructed homes stretching into the distance on the left side of the image. Although the earth around the houses has obviously been moved and shaped to fit the needs of the development, no grass or trees have been planted, so the site looks damaged. In the background on the left side, the Rocky Mountains tower over the developments, and the sky, as usual in this

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series, takes up nearly half of the photograph. The upturned earth looks barren and the electric poles that rise out of the ground look like skeletons dotting the landscape. Death and destruction of the natural landscape in favor of development is the theme of the image. A sense of violation is communicated not only through the torn landscape, but through the single car, which evokes a sense of loneliness, and through the tract houses themselves, which are part of the total development, yet stand alone, isolating the people from one another.

**Carleton Watkins, Ansel Adams and Robert Adams**

The American tradition of environmentalists using photography to bring attention to the state of the landscape begins in the early days of photography with survey photographers like Carleton Watkins. Carleton Watkins is mostly known for his mammoth prints of the Yosemite Valley, which helped create the impetus to push the United States Congress to declare the area a national park closed to development. However, much like the American West, Watkins’ career has also been mythologized. As Mary Warner Marien has argued:

> The bulk of Watkins’ photographs focus not on virginal wilderness, but on the human appropriation of nature… Simply put, the initial and successive reduction of Watkins’ work to a few photographs of pure wilderness indicates the magnitude of nature as social symbol, and the tendency in American culture to value nature as an aesthetic. The mythologizing of Watkins’ life and work around the idea of nature is an intricate installment in the ongoing societal discourse about the American westward expansion.40

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This example of how a large portion of an artist’s career was ignored in order to endorse a myth about the landscape and history of westward expansion is exactly what Adams was attempting to critique in his work. Adams’ statement in the foreword of The New West calls on Americans to look outside of the national parks at the vernacular landscape. Up until the point in history that Adams was working, much of the photography of the American West was only of "virginal wilderness" that further perpetuated the myth. It is not known whether Adams was aware of the Watkins works that documented human development in the West, but it can be assumed that he was unaware.\(^{41}\) In fact looking at Watkins’ image The Town on the Hill, New Almaden, 1863 (Figure 60), one can see similarities between Adams and Watkins in their documentation of human development. Both artists juxtapose the development of houses with the natural landscape. In Watkins’ image the background is dominated by a mountain range and a vast sky – a familiar motif in Adams’ work. However, there is a stark difference between Watkins’ photographs of development and those of Adams: Watkins uses an approach common to documentary photography, whereas Adams adopts a more stylized approach to imaging the landscape.

Watkins’ more famous photographs of the Yosemite Valley, which Adams was most likely to be familiar with, do take on a more stylized approach, which

\(^{41}\) Mary Warner Marlen claims that Watkins’ commercial work on development went unacknowledged until 1979. See Marlen, “Corporate Sublime, 2.
would be classified as beautiful. *The Three Brothers* (1876), captures a rock formation in the Yosemite Valley (Figure 61). The foreground of the image is a reflection of the rock formation and surrounding trees in a body of water, the middle-ground features a dense forest of trees and in the background are the “Three Brothers,” a set of similarly shaped mountains. The scene is bucolic and serene, capturing the beauty of nature. Unlike the sublime, there is no awe or terror and unlike the picturesque, there is no feeling conjured that would evoke one’s imagination. Watkins’ image captures the beauty of nature and this would lend itself to the photographs being used as evidence in lobbying congress to declare the Yosemite Valley a national park.

Perhaps the best known of all environmentally concerned photographers is Ansel Adams. Adams’ images of Yosemite Valley’s iconic landmasses *Half Dome* and *El Capitan* have been canonized in landscape photography. Upon looking at Ansel Adam’s photography it is not immediately obvious that he is trying to make a political statement about the conservation of the most pristine natural spaces in the United States – and in this way his work is like Robert Adams’ photography, which is not always immediately recognizable as a critique of urban sprawl. Adams’ relationship with environmental activist photography is inextricably linked to the Sierra Club, where he began his long tenure as a trip photographer, soon became a trip manager and would eventually be member on the Board of Directors for 37 years. His book, *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail*, published by the Sierra Club, had been used to lobby congress for the creation of the Kings River Region National
Park.\textsuperscript{42} As was the case with Carleton Watkins’ images, Adams’ photographs were used to help protect the environment through the creation of a national park. Both Ansel and Robert Adams had similar environmental concerns and turned to photography as a means to address those concerns. Furthermore, as an admirer of Ansel Adams, Robert Adams utilized the zone system and the other formal techniques employed by Ansel Adams and his contemporaries.

\textit{Thundercloud, North Palisade, Kings Canyon National Park} (1933) is an example of an Ansel Adams landscape photograph that invokes the sublime (Figure 62). The foreground of the photograph depicts a sharp and craggy mountainside. Above the mountains is a massive array of thick clouds that stretch from one end of the frame to the other and up toward the top of the photograph – they take up approximately one half of the image. The clouds dwarf the mountains and are contrasted with a nearly black sky, evoking an ominous presence. Ansel Adams’ vertical composition highlights the juxtaposition between the mountains and the clouds, which in turn shows the sheer magnitude of the thundercloud ready at any moment to drench the mountain. Adams’ zone system is evident in the image with every shade of gray present and details still visible in the dark blacks of the sky and mountains and highlights in the clouds. In this image we can see similar formal techniques, but the subject matter is significantly different. Whereas Ansel Adams captures the sublime quality of nature that invokes awe and terror, Robert Adams

focuses on the picturesque quality, invoking an emotional response that is not as extreme. Robert Adams' work shows the consequences of urban sprawl, whereas Ansel Adams's work looks only at the untouched places that need protection. By ignoring human development in natural spaces, Ansel Adams expands the myth of the American West as a place of untamed grandeur. By turning his camera away from the national parks and pristine natural locales, Robert Adams focuses on the places that are in critical need of protection—places where rampant sprawl threatens the environment.

**Conclusion**

The modern period of the western world saw a steady increase in the use of art as a medium for providing social criticism. As a rejection of Enlightenment ideals, Romantic thinkers in both literature and the visual arts turned to their respective mediums to examine the relationship between people and the environment. Landscape photography, starting in the nineteenth century, began to examine the relationship between humans and nature albeit in an uncritical way that produced images of a bucolic life that probably did not exist for its subjects. Survey photographers like Carleton Watkins took a more documentary approach that captured the landscape for the money making purposes of their employers. Although photographers like Watkins photographed evidence of human development as a product of western expansion, these photographs would not become part of the canon of western landscape photography.
Still, even these myth-making landscape photographs were effectively used as ecocriticism: Carleton Watkins’ mammoth prints, regardless of their intentions, helped persuade congress to declare the Yosemite Valley as a national park and prevented devastating development. These images were manipulated into use for a positive reason, namely, protecting the Yosemite Valley, but they were made for a completely different purpose. Ansel Adams' work with the Sierra Club not only provided his start as an activist photographer, it allowed him to use his photographs to protect the environment and national parks. The works of Watkins and Ansel Adams are examples of how photographs can function as successful ecocriticism, regardless of their intentions. However, the iconic images of Ansel Adams and Carleton Watkins further a mythology of the American West through their failure to directly address the implications of human development.

In *The New West*, Robert Adams attempts to destabilize this mythology by turning his camera away from national parks and towards urban development. As a pioneer in the New Topographics movement, Adams took on the man-altered landscape as a subject to be abhorred and a subject to be celebrated. *The New West* attempts to function as two-fold critique: a critique of the man-altered landscape and a critique of the tradition of landscape photography. Unfortunately, Adams' critique is mitigated by his tendency to aestheticize and romanticize the landscapes. Through formal techniques borrowed from both Ansel Adams and Carleton Watkins – utilization of the zone system, formally rigorous composition and a stylized documentary approach – Adams fails to fully critique the man-altered landscape.
The landscape in and around Denver becomes beautiful in his photographs, and the mythology of the American West as a place of opportunity and freedom is sustained there.
Conclusion

This thesis seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship on ecocriticism in relation to the landscape of the American West. Robert Adams’ series, *The New West*, presents a two-fold critique of the man-altered landscape and the tradition of landscape photography that nevertheless promotes a mythology of the American West. When the series is placed in the historical context of ecocriticism and landscape photography, it becomes clear that instead of performing a critique, Adams has aestheticized and romanticized his subjects. The text he wrote for the *The New West* reveals his intent to urge people to look at the environment in the places in which they in fact live, and to understand the repercussions of their actions as abetting uncontrolled development. This sentiment appears to run counter to the actual photographs within the series because of their aesthetic quality. Adams’ formal techniques utilize the Colorado sunlight to elevate the banal and ugly landscapes that his own writings lament.

Scholarship on Adams has been severely limited, perhaps because although he has been traditionally associated with other, better known “New Topographics” photographers, his work is very different from that of the other artists featured in that show. He does not take the approach of the objective photographer, as did Lewis Baltz, nor does he take the celebratory approach of Steven Shore. Although Adams was photographing the man-altered landscape, he still worked within the
traditional landscape photography genre developed by Ansel Adams and Edward Weston.

The tension created by Adams’ approach to photography – the aesthetic quality of the images set against the ugly quality of the subject matter in the photographs from The New West – creates an ideal case study of ecocritism. Although Adams has yet to be described as an ecocritical photographer, his writings betray his intention to cajole viewers to reexamine traditional notions about the separation of humans and nature. For Adams, these two are conjoined: people may have manipulated the natural world to suit their needs, but Adams argues for an ecological approach:

We also need to see the whole geography, natural and man-made, to experience a peace; all land, no matter what has happened to it, has over it a grace, an absolutely persistent beauty... Towns, many now suggest, are intrusions on sacred landscapes, and who can deny it, looking at the squalor we have laid across America? But even as we see the harm of our work and determine to correct it, we also see that nothing can, in the last analysis, intrude.43

Adams at once condemns the negative impact of development on the land and celebrates the beauty that persists. Yet if his viewers in turn acknowledge that beauty in his photographs, can they still see the ugliness of development? Adams’ aestheticization of these man-altered landscapes inhibits his viewers from acknowledging the damage wrought on the landscape. This tension between the

aesthetic quality of the images and the ugly quality of the subject matter became Adams' personal brand of activism.

In the history of romantic photographic landscape representation, certain critical practices have produced positive results. Works by Ansel Adams and Carleton Watkins were originally created for different purposes, but they were both used at one point or another to lobby congress to create national parks. What made these works successful as activism was the text that accompanied them. Although Robert Adams includes a linguistic message in his books, his message doesn't make the overall intent clear because it runs counter to the aesthetic quality of the photographs.

The 2001 exhibition, *Reinventing the West: The Photographs of Robert Adams and Ansel Adams*, curated by Allison Kemmerer at the Addison Gallery of American Art, compared these two artists and their respective styles of photographing the West.⁴⁴ Although both were photographing the West, Robert Adams utilizes Ansel Adams' "zone system" and other precision techniques regarding photographic production to capture a much different part of the West. Kemmerer's essay compares and contrasts the subject matter of the two photographers, concluding that Ansel Adams and Robert Adams are working in a continuum that reflects this in the continuous change of people's relationship with the West.⁴⁵ On that continuum,

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Robert Adams’ work comes after Ansel Adams’, but sometime before the *New Topographics* exhibition of 1975. Both Kemmerer and Deborah Bright (in the essay *The Machine in the Garden Revisited*) have described the work of Ansel Adams and his contemporaries as romantic, and claim that the work of the *New Topographics* photographers, including Robert Adams, completely abandons these romantic tendencies.\(^{46}\) Yet as I have shown, Robert Adams romanticized the landscape much in the way that his predecessors did. The difference lies in subject matter – Ansel Adams’ untouched natural wonders versus Robert Adams’ man-altered landscape – and the differences that follow from this shift in subject matter prevent romanticization from working as ecocriticism.

In 2003, Adams published *Commercial Residential*, a series of photographs taken of the Colorado front range between 1968- 1973 that had not been included in *The New West*. Robert Adams writes in the introduction to the book:

> To what extent can we love the developing American West? We know the urgency of that question, bitterness having made us exiles. My first attempt to describe the region in a book (*The New West, 1974*) omitted pictures that might have helped. I am grateful now for an opportunity to reproduce them. They record a geography that is still characteristic, one where we could do better, but where the rest is faultless.
> At about the time I took the pictures I read an interview with Raoul Coutard, Jean-Luc Goddard’s cameraman. In it Coutard noted that ‘daylight has an inhuman faculty for always being perfect.’ It is one of the mercies, I believe, by which each of us is allowed to live.\(^{47}\)


Adams’ foreword provides interesting insight to his own reaction to *The New West* nearly thirty years after its publication. If Adams’ text is taken at face value it indicates that he was not satisfied with the original publication. Included in the volume, which could be called an addendum to *The New West*, are 40 photographs, divided into 2 chapters containing 20 photographs each. As indicated by the title of the book, the images are of commercial and residential buildings with very little inclusion of the natural landscape – a theme that is significantly different from that of *The New West*. But the photographs in the book have the same formal qualities as those in *The New West* – a rich tonal range and balanced and harmonious composition. These photographs, however take on a more documentary structure, which is evident in Adams’ on-axis approach when photographing buildings.

The first chapter is of commercial images, often with large amounts of signage, and documents the automobile culture of the American West. None of the images have titles, nor are they given a date, a decision that exaggerates the anonymity and interchangeability of the subject matter. Figure 62 was taken a night, along a busy street. On the left of the photograph large electric signs advertising ice and Coors Beer are illuminated and the front end of a car peeks out in the foreground. On the right side of the photograph, blurry automobiles race toward the viewer out of the frame with more electronic signs and city lights visible in the distance. In this chapter, Adams has been paid significant attention to signage, which was not as prominent in the images of commercial buildings in *The New West*. Furthermore, although Adams’ employs the zone system, the works in this series
have a higher amount of contrast, giving them a degree of edginess not present in *The New West* pictures.

The photographs of suburban residences in the second chapter of *Commercial Residential* are similar to the photographs in the “Tract and Mobile Homes” chapter of *The New West*. Instead of focusing on the developments as a whole, here Adams features images of individual houses. The majority of the images do not include people and very few automobiles are depicted, which is similar to the structure of *The New West* images. Adams also uses similar formal techniques in shooting these images, but the highlights are a bit more blown out and the shadows are darker, resulting in a loss of detail as seen in Figure 63. This subtle change in tonal range removes some of the aestheticization and romanticization of the previous works.

What do these subtle changes in the way the landscape is photographed mean? Why did Adams feel that he needed to add to the series three decades later? Since *The New West* failed to provide the criticisms that Adams was hoping to elucidate though his works, perhaps *Commercial Residential* is an attempt to provide works that better serve his goals. Although all of the images in both books were taken at the same time, they certainly have different sensibilities. Instead of continually juxtaposing the natural landscape with development, the *Commercial Residential* images show how the man-altered landscape has completely overtaken Denver and the surrounding areas. The Colorado sunlight, a source of beauty for Adams, does not play as significant in role in *Commercial Residential* as the higher
contrast in these prints does not provide the same elegance as the previous images, and several of the images have been taken at night.

Scholarship on Adams is limited and this thesis seeks to contribute to the study of his photographs, particularly in light of the emerging field of ecocriticism. As a prolific landscape photographer who, as a "New Topographics," photographer and as a solo artist, has changed the way that landscape photography is practiced, it is of the utmost importance to understand his role in art history.
Bibliography


