

Blurring the Boundaries between City and Countryside in Photography

Steven Jacobs  
*Ghent University*

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**Steven Jacobs,**

**"Blurring the Boundaries between City and Countryside in Photography"**

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.3 (2012)**

Thematic Issue ***New Work on Landscape and Its Narration***

Ed. Sofie Verraest, Bart Keunen, and Katrien Bollen

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**Abstract:** In his article "Blurring the Boundaries between City and Countryside in Photography" Steven Jacobs discusses how, in recent decades, a new landscape has emerged in which the differences between city and countryside have been blurred. As a result, the urbanized environment is increasingly viewed and interpreted as a landscape. It is because of the hybridity of this contemporary cityscape that urban planners such as Mirko Zardini have argued for a reevaluation of the notion of the picturesque linked with a sensitivity to irregularity and a mixture of the cultural and the natural. Since the late 1960s, the post-urban landscape has become an important motif in art photography as well. Jacobs demonstrates how artists and photographers such as Robert Smithson, Joel Sternfeld, John Pfahl, Jeff Wall, and Andreas Gursky pay attention to the whimsical environment in which natural and artificial elements merge.

**Steven JACOBS**

### **Blurring the Boundaries between City and Countryside in Photography**

Perceiving the urban environment as a landscape seems to imply that the former should be seen as a picture. In the late nineteenth century, this logic was already applied to the modern city by Camillo Sitte in his 1889 *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*. With his concept of a continuous urban space, the conviction that buildings have meaning only insofar as they are related to each other, and the idea that connecting elements are significant in and by themselves, Sitte suggests the possibility of the city as a landscape. Furthermore, with his plea for irregularity, imagination, and asymmetry, Sitte reveals himself as the pre-eminent advocate of what is known as picturesque urban planning influential in circles dealing with the preservation of old cities. In his essays on Rome, Florence, and Venice, philosopher and social theorist Georg Simmel, too, suggests that beauty can emerge from the coming together of seemingly diverse and perhaps indifferent urban elements. In addition, he emphasizes that the appreciation of a city becomes aesthetic as a result of distance, abstraction, and sublimation — or, as David Frisby interprets Simmel as the result of an act of framing (108-09). Simmel's reflections on old Italian cities are different from his analyses of the tumult of the metropolis evoked in his 1903 *Die Grosstädte und das Geistesleben*. Roma, Firenze, and Venezia constitute landscapes, whereas the hectic structure of metropolitan existence provides only the material for it. Yet, at least in the opening remarks of his 1910 *Philosophie der Landschaft*, Simmel suggests the possibility of the modern metropolis as a landscape. This idea was developed in greater detail by the art nouveau architect and designer August Endell, who belonged to Simmel's circle. In *Die Schönheit der grossen Stadt* (1908), Endell stresses the aesthetic beauty of the metropolis in an impressionist manner. Furthermore, he speaks of the city as a landscape or of the "landschaftliche Schönheit der Stadt" (178, 185). Much as the aestheticization of nature became possible by painting, the aestheticization of cities is achieved by turning them into landscapes.

The interpretation of the city as a landscape is also reflected by the development of terms such as "cityscape" or "townscape." The *Oxford English Dictionary* informs us that, although Thackeray had already used the word "cityscape" in 1856, the term did not come into fashion until a hundred years later. One of the earliest meanings of the term is linked to attempts to describe cityscapes "in terms of a neo-Wordsworthian natural beauty" (3, 254). From the very start, the concept not only implied a larger, territorial scale, but a specific, Transcendentalist vision of urban space as well. The term "townscape" is inherently linked with the writings of Gordon Cullen, who conceived of urban design as a form of landscape design. Cullen published his ideas in articles in the *Architectural Review* since the mid-1940s and summarized them in *Townscape* in 1961: he describes the art of townscape as the control of the sequence of views presented by an urban landscape (see also Wigley 42-45). The urban planner had the task to create significant patterns in the urban chaos. Like Sitte, Cullen considered the town as a series of pictures in which one painterly view leads to the other. Clearly appealing to the theory of the picturesque, the townscape philosophy heavily relied on different kinds of images. Cullen himself alternated sequences of sketches and photographs, and the notion of townscape also inspired several leading architectural photographers in the 1950s (Elwall 158, 171).

The notion of an urban landscape acquired new meanings when, in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, a new decentralized urban model developed in which the differences between center and periphery, city and countryside, and culture and nature are no longer clearly defined. While urban cultures and lifestyles have invaded rural areas, nature, to a large extent, has become a human artifact. The contemporary city should no longer be seen as something that exists in opposition to or alongside nature; today's urbanized environment includes large parts of the natural landscape. One could argue that Europe has become a single mega-city that encompasses the Alps and the Mediterranean beaches. The dream to abolish the differences between city and countryside, which was part of the ideas of numerous social reformers and urban planners from various ideological positions, has been realized in unsuspected and sometimes perverse ways. These developments are found on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, for instance, vast urban networks developed in which two seemingly contradictory processes are at stake. On the one hand, the still-ongoing urbanization contributes to the destruction of nature. On the other, rural reconstruction and renewal, which

developed as a result of the reduction of agricultural areas and the decay of traditional industries, have become important phenomena. In the United States, too, city and countryside have merged in new ways. In the 1970s and 1980s, new urban concentrations developed in the periphery of major cities, characterized by new forms of low-density settlement that Leo Marx has labeled "rurbia" ("The American" 62-78). According to Marx, these new phenomena tally with a long US-American anti-urban tradition which connected pastoral ideals with a faith in technological progress — a tradition he had already described in his 1964 *The Machine in the Garden*.

Precisely because the contemporary, hybrid, and dispersed urban landscape combines characteristics of the former city, suburb, periphery, and countryside, the urbanized environment is increasingly seen and interpreted as a landscape in new ways. This is indicated, for instance, by the rise of the new discipline of environmental design, which developed in the late 1960s in the wake of the publication of *Design With Nature* (1966) by Ian McHarg. Environmental design exchanged the preoccupation with form and space of traditional landscape design for the analysis of the relation between nature and the built environment. Completely of a piece with the emerging ecological consciousness, McHarg stresses the importance of studying a whole range of environmental factors for design practice. Undoubtedly, McHarg has also stimulated the research tradition that interprets the modern city as an ecosystem. Since the 1970s, attention has been paid to climatologic factors in urban processes. In addition, biologists have been charting the flora and fauna on skyscrapers, traffic islands, pavements, suburban gardens, and urban wastelands (McHarg; see also Friederici; Laurie). Moreover, the interpretation of the urban environment as landscape unmistakably stimulated the revival of the discipline of landscape architecture, which, in the 1980s, became an important issue in architectural and urban debates. Instead of dealing with the little neighborhood park or local facilities, the landscape architect started to pay more attention to the relation between buildings and the landscape in which they are erected. As a result of the merging of city and countryside, the gap between the disciplines of urban planning and landscape architecture narrowed as well. According to Sébastien Marot, the traditional strategies of urban planning were insufficient to reshape the attenuated urban environment. Landscape architecture seemed better suited than traditional urban planning strategies to read urban space as a sediment of succeeding interpretations. Most projects of landscape architecture in de-structured urban fabrics do not aspire to integrate things (as would be the case in contextualist architecture), but mainly aim at exposing the characteristics of a certain site. Given that it returns suppressed geographical elements to their normal proportions, and reinterprets tracks and old constructions, landscape architecture is, in the first place, an exercise in reading the landscape. Whereas architects and urban planners only detect chaos, the landscape architect, with his predilection for borders and in-between spaces, is still able to see order, form, and structure.

The transformation of the periphery into a kind of hybrid space that combines remnants of the former countryside with metropolitan functions is also the area of expertise of Italian urban planner Mirko Zardini. According to Zardini, green is the color that is increasingly present on maps of the contemporary city. Whereas in the past, green indicated nature and hence the negation of urbanity, the contemporary cityscape is cut through by large open spaces, resulting in a post-urban, heterogeneous, fragmented, and hybrid landscape "interspersed with green zones — parks, gardens, sporting grounds, protected zones, vegetable patches" (Zardini 435). In order to interpret and master this contemporary fragmented landscape, Zardini argues for a reevaluation of the notion of the picturesque:

only the sensibility of the picturesque allows us to observe this territory with new eyes: to understand the differences, the contrasts, the mixtures, and the nuances, and to appreciate them. This sensibility leads us to observe the edges, the borders, the lines of contrasts or superimposition of different worlds, more than the homogeneity that is to be found within each of the elements, small or large. ... Dissymmetry and variety, irregularity, the unexpected, the intertwined, raw materials, tactile values, all that becomes part of the picturesque. The picturesque is inclusive, which is to say that it incorporates the surrounding landscape into the gaze, it accepts individual expression, it blurs the traditional distinction between natural and artificial. What heretofore have been considered negative elements in the contemporary city — heterogeneity, excessive variety, disorder, disharmony, the incongruous coexistence of different pieces — now constitute a resource, a quality with which to define a new landscape. (436)

Zardini's plea for a reevaluation of the notion of the picturesque as a tool for interpreting today's landscape is striking since the concept was closely related to the eighteenth-century English landscape garden. Designers such as William Kent, Thomas Bridgeman, Lancelot "Capability" Brown, and Humphrey Repton gradually exchanged the severe geometry of the French garden model for a carefully recreated English "natural" landscape. The new style — introduced by philosophers and writers such as Shaftesbury, Temple, Addison, and Pope, rather than by professional gardeners — was not characterized by a predilection for the whimsicality of nature, but rather by the image of the whimsicality and irregularity of nature (Tobey 128-35). This is convincingly demonstrated by the prominent theoreticians of the picturesque, such as Richard Payne Knight, Uvedale Price, and William Gilpin, who presented the picturesque as a separate and autonomous aesthetic category alongside the beautiful and the sublime as defined by Edmund Burke (see, e.g., Steenbergen and Reh 253). In the aesthetics of the picturesque, nature is approached indirectly, through pictures: English landscape gardens were designed to be viewed as a Lorrain, Poussin, Rosa, or Ruysdael might paint them (Tobey 135).

Consequently, the term "picturesque" refers to both a certain kind of landscape, which is suitable as a subject for a painting, and a fragment of reality that could be viewed as if it were part of a painting. On the one hand, new landscape gardens were provided with carefully coded meanings and constructed as a series of composed scenes. On the other, the viewer could discover and recognize picturesque scenes in nature itself. William Gilpin's *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; On Sketching Landscape* (1794), for instance, encourages tourists "to frame views, to graduate prospects from foreground to background, and above all to ensure variety of painted, drawn or engraved texture, which minimized similar qualities in the natural world" (Dixon Hunt 236). For theoreticians of the picturesque, however, the importance and place of pictorial mediation has been as a source of contention from the very start. Whereas Burke situates the qualities of the sublime and the beautiful at the level of perception, Uvedale Price refers to the visual qualities of the landscape itself. Later, Richard Payne Knight distances himself from these opinions and states that it is untenable to see the picturesque as a quality of the landscape (Steenbergen and Reh 253). This controversy clearly demonstrates the importance of visual mediation and techniques of representation, and it always recurs when the ever-changing landscape is interpreted or subjected to human interventions. Moreover, the aspect of controversy is included in the very notion of landscape, which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, appeared for the first time in 1603 and stood for "a picture representing natural inland scenery" (8, 628). The word was borrowed from the Dutch *landschap*, probably because of the influence and the prestige of landscape painting from the Netherlands. In Dutch, however, the word had always denoted both a "piece of land, region" and an "image" representing such a piece of land. In Romance languages, too, *paysage*, *paisaje*, and *paesaggio* have this double meaning. This double meaning is telling: it focuses our attention on the fact that landscape is not just a part of the environment or nature, but has also always been dependent on its structuring by human presence and by the gaze in particular (Lemaire and Kolen 11-26). The experience and the representation of landscapes are closely connected. Several scholars — including art historian Ernst Gombrich, who has emphasized frequently the role of mental concepts in perception — even argue that the art of painting made possible the aesthetic experience of the environment as a landscape (Smuda 64-65; see also Howett 86-87).

Zardini's plea for a reevaluation of the picturesque results from the need to find a conceptual model for reading and understanding the contemporary fragmented and hybrid cityscape. Charting and defining this amorphous environment is not easy, as the plethora of neologisms illustrates: edge city (Joel Garreau), middle landscape (Peter Rowe), generic city (Rem Koolhaas), city à la carte (Robert Fishman), exopolis (Edward Soja), postsuburbia (Jon Teaford), *città diffusa* (Stefano Boeri), nonplace urban realm (Melvin Webber), *Zwischenstadt* (Thomas Sieverts), and many others. This terminological abundance and the resulting confusion of ideas indicate that the contemporary cityscape is difficult to comprehend and evaluate — hence the need for structures and frameworks to reconceptualize today's built environment. Visualizing and representing the contemporary landscape are the first steps towards understanding it. As a result, leading architects and urban planners dealing with the diluted post-urban landscape have invited photographers and artists to visualize and interpret this contemporary environment.

The collaboration between urban planner Stefano Boeri and photographers such as Gabriele Basilico and Francesco Jodice is perhaps one of the most elaborate examples of this alliance (Basilico and Boeri; see also *Mutations* 196-205 and 474-83). In the 1980s, Basilico, with many other internationally known photographers, had already participated in the impressive photographic mission of DATAR (Délégation à l'Aménagement du Territoire et à l'Action Régionale). This mission, sponsored by the French socialist government, explicitly aimed at turning the landscape of the planner — often an abstract realm consisting of maps and statistics — into something more concrete and tangible. For the initiators of DATAR, the complexity of the contemporary environment could not be captured through a naïve documentary and representational interpretation of the medium of photography: "How can hybrid landscape structures that do not even have a name be expressed in precise photographic studied themes?" (Hers and Latarjet 447). Instead, DATAR asked photographers with artistic ambitions to join the program: "Conscious of the need to gradually give the concept 'landscape' its underlying meaning of 'lost culture,' DATAR decided to approach photographers who assert both their role as artists and their will to confront this situation with new social needs. ... In landscapes which have lost their coherence and their value — where old values are no more than relics — a work of creativity is needed to give a meaning to these 'landscape conditions'" (Hers and Latarjet 447, 451; see also Chevrier). According to landscape architect Galen Crantz, "photography has helped us, through the device of the frame, to see order where before we only saw chaos" (122). The importance of photography for urban planning tallies with its merging with the discipline of landscape architecture, which is a craft that has always been intimately bound up with developments in the fields of surveying, painting, the graphic arts, the theater, and scenography (Marot 25).

Robert Smithson, in particular, is of interest here. As a prominent member of the Land Art movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Smithson constantly operated within the dialectic tension between "site" and "nonsite" (see Smithson, *robertsmithson.com* <<http://www.robertsmithson.com>>). He exchanged the museum space for the deserts of the Southwest, but did not connect his artistic praxis to the romantic idea of virgin nature. On the contrary, Smithson's biotope was the postindustrial, entropic landscape, and, therefore, his work is all about the problem of the visual representation of such a landscape. Smithson expounded his views on this topic in a 1973 article entitled "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape." In this essay on New York's Central Park, he extensively refers to earlier theoreticians of the picturesque, such as William Gilpin and Uvedale Price, both of them sources of inspiration for Olmsted's work, and for his design of Central Park in particular. In the picturesque tradition, Smithson focuses on the small, capricious changes of the landscape and on the interaction between man and nature, both of which fall outside the classical categories of the beautiful and the sublime. However, Smithson also re-conceptualizes the notion of the picturesque by displaying an attentiveness to the effects of urban decay and dilapidation, including drugs, graffiti, and litter, which seamlessly links up with his fascination with entropy. According to Smithson, earlier interpretations of the picturesque were too confined because they focused too much on the creations of "scenes" and did not take into account the possibilities of ceaseless reconstruction. Whereas Olmsted was interested in scenic dispositions, Smithson prioritizes time. Moreover, he associates this attention to time and to the traces of use with the image of the ruin, which, being an important scenic element in the English landscape garden, was intertwined with the aesthetics of the picturesque.

Last but not least, Smithson explicitly connects the theme of the picturesque with the dull and monotonous world of the urban periphery. In his famous 1967 essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," Smithson compares the desolate building materials and unfinished constructions with ruins. "That zero panorama," he contended, "seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is — all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built" (Smithson, "Monuments" 72). In addition, Smithson constantly speaks of the "photographic" or "cinematic" qualities of the landscape. He explains that "noon-day sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an over-exposed picture. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detached series of 'stills' through my Instamatic into my eye. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph" (Smithson, "Monuments" 70).

Smithson's work thus reinterprets and updates the notion of the picturesque. His entire oeuvre is characterized by a predilection for amorphous landscapes in which the man-made and the natural blend, and his whole mental universe is punctuated by remarks about the mutual permeability of the world and its representation. Landscapes are perceived as series of reproductions. To be sure, the landscape painting of Poussin or Claude no longer acts as a guideline. Instead, technical and industrial developments have made it possible to view the world as an image. As Smithson notes: "The landscape begins more to look like a three dimensional map rather than a rustic garden" ("Aerial Art" 116). Moreover, this phenomenon was enhanced by the reproductive possibilities of photography and film, which were so important to the perception of earthworks. Since the invention of photography, Smithson observes, the world has been colonized by the camera and the earth has become a museum ("Art" 371; "Fragments" 188). In another text, he proclaims that "nature falls into an infinite series of movie stills — we get what Marshall McLuhan calls the Reel World" ("A Museum" 91). Smithson, in other words, makes clear that the dialectical relation between the site and its representation, contained in the etymological meaning of the word "landscape," has acquired new dimensions in the age of mechanical reproduction. Scenic beauty, for instance, plays an important role in tourism, which is inherently linked with industrial image production. According to historian Peter Schmitt, the tourists who started to explore the US-American wilderness at the beginning of the twentieth century "were not impressed by the wilderness itself. They looked instead for the unique, the spectacular, or the sublime, drawing their standards from stereoscopic views, picture postcards, railroad advertising, magazine illustrations, Romantic literature, and landscape art. Scenic beauty was an art form, and its inspiration a preconditioned experience" (155). Smithson elaborates on these considerations in *Photo-Markers* (1968), which consists of photographs of landscape fragments that are themselves re-photographed *in situ* (Reynolds 208; Sobieszek 110-11).

In order to transform the chaotic post-urban landscape into a comprehensive image, some artists and photographers have referred to pictorial conventions and precedents. Like the eighteenth-century garden designers and theorists of the picturesque, they approach and visualize nature indirectly, through earlier representations of the landscape. Joel Sternfeld, for instance, visualizes the vague border area between nature and city by means of a large-format camera. He recorded the urbanization of the US-American landscape in his series in 1987 (see Sternfeld, *American*; see also Brougher, Grundberg, Tucker), which frequently evokes the bird's-eye views of Pieter Brueghel the Elder (see Brougher, "Corrupting"; Grundberg 87-91). Fusing the foreground and background into one continuous map-like sequence, Sternfeld, like his sixteenth-century predecessor, brings together figure, landscape, and narrative into one master frame that slowly reveals its secrets. His sometimes breathtaking vistas, provoking a contemplative and slow-viewing experience, depict man's place in a complex contemporary world in which nature and culture have merged. Sternfeld also reinvests the landscape with a sense of narrative or a sense of mystery by framing situations that often have humorous or surreal qualities. Examples include a stretch of coastline with beached sperm whales surrounded by strollers; an exhausted elephant in the middle of the road tugged by puny humans; a mother breast-feeding her child outside a house trailer; a fireman buying pumpkins while a house is burning in the background; a man fishing in the shadow of a huge battle ship; and toy trucks, derricks, and bulldozers on a little sand heap behind suburban houses. His panoramic views often reveal a kind of dark side of the American landscape, as illustrated by photographs of tract houses located under threatening dark clouds, and a suburban Eden that, as the lower half of the picture reveals, has just survived a devastating flash flood. The flip sides of Sternfeld's Arcadia, however, are not only created by the sublime forces of nature. Sternfeld also shows that majestic views turn into real estate and that Americans usually have the desire to live in an artificial oasis or an aquatic theme park rather than in the real world. By visualizing a nature that has been staged, he demonstrates that the principle of the picturesque, which developed in close relation with the artificial scenery of the English landscape garden, has been appropriated by late-capitalist market forces that reorganize the relations between city and countryside.

Sternfeld's eye for the uncanny aspects of the US-American landscape is also illustrated by his series *On This Site: Landscape in Memoriam*, in which he represents all kinds of seemingly banal places. The banality of the sites, however, is misleading. Each photo is accompanied by a text which reveals that the specific, ordinary-seeming place we are shown once became the site of a dramatic or

even gruesome event. Sternfeld captures these places, banal and insignificant in themselves, long after press photographers have gone. By doing so, he questions the notion of collective memory as well as its relation to place. In addition, he comments on the alleged innocence of the landscape. Around 1990, Sternfeld photographed the Roman *campagna*, which played a vital role in the development of the aesthetics of the picturesque (Sternfeld, *Campagna*). He made rewarding use of obligatory picturesque paraphernalia: Roman ruins, melancholic dusk, red-colored earth, cypresses and pine-trees, and, in some cases, a lonesome horseman or a flock of sheep with a sheepdog. Simultaneously, however, he aimed his view camera at the whimsical signs of contemporary urbanization: the new residential settlements under construction, billboards, recreation parks, and cars with lovers parked underneath classical monuments. His pictures make clear that every civilization is inherently linked with decay. But in the first place, they are convincing meditations on the role of history and collective memory in the perception of the (urban) landscape.

The disappearance of the innocence of nature and the possibility of a reevaluation of the picturesque also characterizes the work of John Pfahl <<http://johnpfahl.com>>, who, in the early 1980s made a series of color photographs entitled *Power Places*, which consists of images of nuclear plants and power stations set in an Arcadian landscape. At first sight, these pictures suggest that the age-old conflict between the machine and the garden — to use Leo Marx's phrasing — has been solved. With their well-determined horizon dispositions, their predilection for atmospheric effects and mirroring water surfaces as well as with their carefully constructed balance between fore- and backgrounds, Pfahl's photographs refer to Claude and Poussin as well as to the conventions used in nineteenth-century representations of the landscape in both painting and photography. Although there is an unmistakable element of parody or irony, Pfahl convincingly combines the picturesque with an ecological dimension without resorting to nostalgic simplifications. Sally Eauclaire has already noted that people with completely different political ideas have referred to Pfahl in order to support their opinions (Eauclaire 181-96). While, for some, Pfahl's images demonstrate the beauty of technology and its commensurability with nature, for others, they show frozen drab waters, apocalyptic sunsets, and other signs of decay and destruction — from this perspective, they dovetail with an aesthetic of the sublime as well.

In the more recent series *Permutations on the Picturesque*, Pfahl refers to the picturesque tradition by photographing locations in the Lake District that had already been labeled "picturesque" in eighteenth-century travel guides. Furthermore, the images are digitally processed, resulting in photographic images that emulate picturesque watercolors. Thwarting a nostalgic use of traditional motifs and techniques, Pfahl "disturbs" his images by means of a strip of enlarged pixels. The representation of an ideal landscape is thus disconnected from its referent. While this principle is inherently linked with the tradition of the picturesque, it now acquires a new dimension due to the possibilities of digital image processing. Other prominent art photographers, too, demonstrate that the use of picturesque conventions does not necessarily imply nostalgia. The interconnectedness of landscape and image — crucial for the notion of the picturesque — tallies with the perception of the landscape in a postindustrial society. On the one hand, economic restructuring and the proliferation of new media are important causes of contemporary disurbanization; on the other, the transformation of what Walter Benjamin has called "the age of mechanical production" into an age of electronic simulation has revitalized the picturesque preference for the dialectic relation between images and their referents. This is undoubtedly the case in the work of Jeff Wall (Wall <[http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/wall\\_jeff.html](http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/wall_jeff.html)>), who combines the possibilities of digital image-processing with references to pictorial precedents and to the idea that painting once excelled at telling stories. With their references to painting and cinema, their use of staging with actors, and their digital compositions, Wall's large "Salon-type" pictures emphasize their artificiality and the fact that they have been mediated through other pictures and processes of image production (Brougher, "The Photographer"). Furthermore, in order to elaborate this peculiar mixture of new and traditional media, Wall strikingly prefers an unromantic, industrialized, and suburbanized landscape. Wall slings the conventions of the pastoral tradition into a world of post-urban wastelands: a suburban residential area cut through by large traffic infrastructure (in *Eviction Struggle* or *The Bridge*), remnants of nature enclosed by suburban developments (in *A Hunting Scene*), overgrown rear sides of industrial or commercial buildings (in *The Crooked Path*), or a forgotten place under a highway where wilderness



and urbanization merge (in *The Storyteller*). In that sense, Wall answers to the aesthetics of the picturesque in two ways. On the one hand, Wall's post-urban landscapes are undefined and whimsical; on the other, their whimsicality is constrained because they are constructed on the basis of pictorial models.

Andreas Gursky [http://www.spruethmagers.com/artists/andreas\\_gursky](http://www.spruethmagers.com/artists/andreas_gursky)> also connects the use of digital manipulation with an outspoken interest in the peripheral areas between nature and civilization (see Galassi). At first sight, images such as *Klausenpass* or *Seilbahn* seem to be romantic evocations of a sublime nature. Numerous details, however, reveal that these pristine landscapes have already been conquered by recreation and tourism. Wilderness has already been tamed by the tourist industry, and nature seems to have been reduced to a component of a global city. Gursky, too, refers to art-historical antecedents. For instance, with its wealth of details, the reflections on the water surface, and the calculated balance between figures and horizon, his famous picture of swimmers in the Rhine, *Neujahrsschwimmer*, harks back to Canaletto, who was popular in eighteenth-century England (where the tradition of the picturesque originated). Other works are reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich, but they exchange the sublime natural landscape for a spectacular postindustrial landscape of highways, runways, or soccer fields. In addition, Gursky often draws attention to the fact that the urban landscape itself has become a simulated environment. This is clearly visible in his digitally processed pictures of atriums, which are the ultimate examples of an artificial urban realm. Gursky combines the earlier logics of the picturesque with a postmodern cult of the simulacrum.

Gursky's cities are reduced to sim cities, while nature prepares itself for mass tourist exploitation. Similar to the way in which Carleton Watkins and William Henry Jackson presented the spectacular landscapes of the US West as potential sites for reclamation and technological progress in the nineteenth century (see Snyder), the contemporary landscape is ready for tourist exploration. The photographs by Pfahl, Sternfeld, Wall, and Gursky do not address a nineteenth-century society warming up for industrialization, but a postindustrial society resolutely directed toward consumerism, individual narcissism, and leisure. The belief in progress has made room for a vague awareness of ecological fragility; sublime nature is transformed into an almost insignificant background for the spectacular kicks promised by the tourist industry. Because Pfahl, Sternfeld, Wall, and Gursky make this reality visible, their reevaluation of the picturesque is far from nostalgic. Their images reject the nostalgic dimension of tourist image production by, paradoxically, not banning tourist infrastructure from their "natural" landscapes. As a result, they critically investigate how we can experience and value today's urbanized landscape. The pictures by Smithson, Sternfeld, Pfahl, Wall, and Gursky can be seen as contemporary equivalents of the eighteenth-century Claude Glass, the optical device that enabled the traveler to observe the English landscape as a picture that could be described, copied, and contained. Without harking back to the idea of a virgin nature and without glorifying the post-urban environment, these artists attempt to chart the whimsical, contemporary urbanized landscape with the help of the artistic models and practices of the tradition of the picturesque.

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Author's profile: Steven Jacobs

<<http://www.kunstwetenschappen.ugent.be/personeel/departmentnumber/lw17/ugentid/801001068067>> teaches history of modern and contemporary art at Ghent University. He specializes in the artistic visualizations of architecture, cities, and landscape in film and photography and his other research interests focus on the relations between film and the visual arts. Jacobs's book publications include *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock* (2007) and *Framing Pictures: Film and the Visual Arts* (2011). E-mail: <[steven.jacobs@ugent.be](mailto:steven.jacobs@ugent.be)>