

(Music)

Jeff: Hi, this is Jeff Curto, Professor of Photography at College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, and welcome to a special class session of History of Photography. In fact, this really isn't a class session of History of Photography at all; instead, it is a presentation that I gave to the Mayslake Nature Study and Nature Photography Club, which meets at the Mayslake Forest Preserve in the Peabody Estate. The Peabody family, a well-known family in the Chicago suburban area, had this gorgeous estate, and we met there.

The Nature Photography Club asked me to give a talk about the history of nature photography. I was delighted to be asked and was very happy to prepare some comments about the history of nature photography, which we started from the very beginning of the medium and took all the way through some contemporary ideas about nature photography, in a short, less than an hour, presentation about the history of photography of the natural world.

So here we are, joining the Mayslake Nature Study and Photography Club at the Peabody Estate in Oak Brook, Illinois, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February, 2008.

Jeff: I'm going to say this right off the bat. I had no idea when I titled this *The Camera in the Cathedral* that I'd actually be giving the presentation in a church. I think it's kind of interesting ... it was not part of my master plan, but I did want to spend some time tonight talking about photography of the natural world and looking at the trajectory of what that photography or that type of photography has been about, not only at the beginning of the medium, but also in the middle of it and then also toward the end, like right now, and see if we can see what nature photography, at least in one aspect, is about.

One of the things that I have as a basic belief about the medium and about the medium's involvement with photographs of the natural world is the idea that nature, as a sort of overall idea, ended up being offered up as sort of an American version of a cathedral, because if you think about it, especially any of you who've been to Europe and seen these enormous religious structures, man's edification toward the eternal, we don't have that really here in this country, and I think one of the things that I'm going to try to look at is the idea of how nature really kind of became almost our cathedral.

We're also going to take a look at the romantic tradition of doing that, but also take a look at some things that happened a little after the middle of the last century, and see how that changed the face of photography. I also wanted to point out that I'm borrowing fairly heavily here from a really wonderful and very

interesting [Inaudible, audio skip 00:03:25]. On the handout is a link to the pdf version of this, if you were so inclined, a really interesting, very informative article called "The Machine in the Garden Revisited: American Environmentalism and Photographic Aesthetics," written by photo historian Deborah Bright in 1992. So I did want to talk to the idea that I have borrowed some of this content at least from Deborah and from her article.

I want you to fasten your seatbelts because what we're up to here is an overview. Necessarily, with an overview of this sort, there's going to be a bunch of stuff I'm going to leave out. There's going to be a bunch of your favorite photographers that I won't mention at all because of the time constraint that we have just in terms of doing this, and as I started thinking about this, this actually is a big enough topic that we could go on for weeks in terms of the ideas.

Some of the main ideas I want to get at are these, that the camera helps determine what's important to us. The camera helps to find what we believe and the definition of nature has changed over time, and we'll see if we can come up with some ways in which it's changed, the idea of what images of nature are most useful and most important to us at any given moment in the history of our involvement in photography or the history of our involvement in the world, in the natural world.

I put this on the handout so you don't have to figure it out, but a quick little timeline of where we're going to go, and one of the things that some of you who had classes with me over the years know is, I tend to like to get a running start into something. So we're going to start way back in the 1790s with the picturesque and the idea of making pictures look right and real and beautiful. We'll go on to romanticism and look at the idea of the way Baudelaire put it. He said, "Paintings have communicated not in choice of subject or exact truth, but in a way of feeling," so the idea of the romantic notion of feeling, of emotion, in some way.

We'll also look briefly at photography's invention because obviously putting that into the spot of where things are really helps us figure out the kinds of problems that photography was solving in some way. We'll look briefly at landscape and travel photography, a sort of golden era of that from the 1850s to the 1880s, and how photographers began to view the natural world.

We'll also then go on from there to pictorialism, a movement right around the turn of the century that stressed emotion, atmosphere, and artistic quality over realism, and note the qualities that link it to the romantic ideal, the idea of the romance or the romantic quality of the natural world.

We'll go on to look at modernism and precisionist photography in the 1930s, and then we'll talk about The New Topographics, an exhibition that occurred in 1975 that really changed how nature was seen and, more importantly, how nature was photographed after that time.

Then we'll also try and look at some things about our time and see if we can find out where nature photography is in our contemporary time. Again, remember that I'm spinning this in a particular way based on my background and my understanding of photography as a whole, and my understanding of the history of the medium as a whole. So hang on to your hats.

We're going to start out with this thing, which is Jacques Louis David, the great French painter, who painted in a style called history painting or a type, a sort of genre of painting called history painting. History paintings were paintings that told some sort of story. They were about some historical event that happened in the painter's time, or in the case of David's *Oath of the Horatii* from 1784, it's a story about ancient Roman times. So it's a historical picture, a historical idea.

Am I off kilter there? I'm all casting my own shadow there.

Generally speaking, critics of art believed that this sort of painting, history painting, was the zenith of the painter's world. It was the thing that did all of the things that were necessary for visual communication. It transmitted a story. It had the potential to morally uplift. It could instruct. It had all of those sort of characteristics that went along with a time period that was, in general, not nearly as literate as those that would come after.

Sort of an interesting offshoot of that is the idea of the picturesque. The picturesque, the idea that a picture could be beautiful, beautiful, regardless of its message or regardless of the point that it was making, the story it might be telling. The interesting thing is that this sort of painting, landscape painting ... here we have Jericho's *Evening: Landscape with an Aqueduct* and Richard Wilson, *Solitude* ... the interesting thing is that these kind of paintings were put kind of at the bottom level, because they didn't do those things that history paintings did. They didn't morally uplift. They didn't instruct. They simply were beautiful.

In fact, as part of the picturesque, there were a number of people who looked at the idea of telling the story or making the picture beautiful or picturesque, including this guy, Reverend William Gilpin, a very important ... not necessarily a particularly important artist, but a really important theoretician about art. He wrote a series of articles that started out as little journals. Here's an example of one of his journals and the one that he ended up publishing was called *In Pursuit of the Picturesque*, right at the end of the 1700s.

In this particular page, he's talking about how to clump trees, the idea being that as he would put it, that nature was particularly good at producing things like textures and producing things like colors, but it wasn't necessarily good at creating the perfect composition, that somehow the creator had left that out, and so it was his contention that the idea would be to perfect creation by learning how to reorganize the landscape. We'll come back to that idea in a little while, but the idea that extra help from the artist, perhaps in the form of a carefully placed tree or a clumped set of trees might be required.

What we get out of that, and you're wondering, when are we getting to the photographs ... I'm going to get there eventually, but I like to set the stage for these things, because out of that comes this idea of romanticism, the idea of capturing a feeling in a picture, the notion that you could combine the ideas of the history painting, moral uplift, but also combine that with notions of the picturesque, something that was beautiful. So we have Constable here, *Weymouth Bay*. We have this image by William Bliss Baker, *The Fallen Monarch*, and then the great American painter, Thomas Moran, *An Autumnal Scene*.

The idea that what we have here is this sort of change over time in the way in which painting was perceived, so we went from history painting as being the zenith of what the artistic academy thought was the most important thing, and we began to slowly supplant it with pictures of the natural world that may or may not have some sort of moral story to them in some way.

Part of the history of photography was discovering that some chemical elements were sensitive to the action of light, and all three of these images here are by William Henry Fox Talbot. Talbot was a British ... sort of a man of leisure, a guy who lived in a place not unlike where we are right now, the Peabody estate, a large estate, did not need to work, and was a man of science and a man of great learning and a great interest in science.

He began to figure out ways in which he could make light-sensitive materials. He took some experiments that had been done a couple of hundred years beforehand and began in the 1830s, really earlier than that, the late 1820s, but really began to do it in earnest in the 1830s, began to figure out a way to make pictures without having to make a drawing, because he was an artist. He really loved to draw, but he also recognized that probably like many of us in this room who are photographers, that he wasn't very good at drawing.

He had some issues with it, had some problems with trying to get it right. Raise your hand. You tried, right? And you gave up, at least that was my case. In art school, all my teachers, painting and drawing teachers, would say, "Photography, good. Keep on with the photography stuff."

So what Talbot did after he figured out light-sensitive materials is, he began to make shadow pictures. Some of you who had photography classes where you've done darkroom work or perhaps you've done your own darkroom work may recognize these as photograms, and for those who didn't know what a photogram was, I put a little nugget at the bottom for you to understand.

What happens here is simply the placement of an object, in this case, botanical specimens, down over a sheet of light-sensitive paper. The paper is exposed to bright light. As it gets more and more exposed, the areas where the light is hitting the paper get dark; the areas where the light does not hit the paper because the object is there stay light. So he's making some pictures. He's making pictures by the action of the light of the sun, but not using a camera.

It's interesting to me though that one of the very earliest things that Fox Talbot did with his process was make botanical specimen pictures. On one level, I suppose it's not that remarkable because that was a fairly common idea of what pictures were in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially pictures by somebody who aspired to be an artist. They might take an apple blossom and draw it very carefully, so he's really working within that same idea, but working on it with this idea of automatic picture making, so botanical specimen images.

Fox Talbot is only part of the story of the invention of photography and some of you may know this stuff and some not, so I am just giving you the quick and dirty way of understanding this. Photography has, I think, one of the most fascinating histories of all artistic media, and one of the reasons I find it completely fascinating is that two different bodies of workers, these two guys, Fox Talbot, a British worker, and Daguerre, a French worker, emerged at almost exactly the same moment with similar, but patently different, methods of making pictures, almost at exactly the same moment without knowledge of one another, without knowledge that the other person was working on something like this.

Certainly they had the knowledge that people were trying to get at pictures, not without the hand to draw them, but they didn't really know that there was somebody as close as they were. So in January of 1839, both of these guys announced their inventions, Fox Talbot to the Royal Academy of Science, Daguerre to the French Academy of Sciences in Paris.

The two men's processes differed rather dramatically, however, even though they were very similar and involved similar materials. Daguerre's process was a direct positive. Think about Polaroid pictures, not for much longer as you may have noted when you saw the news that Polaroid is not going to make film any more, right? Saw that interesting piece of news. Another nail in the coffin of traditional photography, but the idea here is that it's a direct positive.

The actual thing that goes into the back of the camera is the actual thing that you eventually hold in your hand and call a photograph. It's a direct, one-of-a-kind image that had, as its huge advantage, that it was remarkably highly detailed, unbelievably detailed, so detailed that you could take a magnifying glass and look at it under increasingly higher levels of magnification and see more and more and more details inside the image, something that the 19<sup>th</sup>-century people thought was just astonishing.

Fox Talbot, on the other hand, produced a process that initially produced a tonally reversed image, what we call a negative. In fact, he ended up calling it that, but not at least at first. So a tonally reversed image where light was dark and dark was light, from which he would take that piece of paper that he used to get that negative, because that was the material he had available to him that worked for his process ... he took that piece of paper that was a negative and placed it in contact with another piece of paper that he had sensitized in a similar way, and made from that a positive.

If you think about using a piece of paper as a negative, a piece of 19<sup>th</sup>-century writing paper as a negative, you can imagine that the quality of the image was going to suffer some, right? The fibers of the paper would be a little bit breaking up the image as it went through that negative onto the next piece of paper. It had the huge advantage, however, of being reproducible. What I've really found fascinating over the time that I've been studying the history of photography is that here are these two guys, on opposite sides of the Channel, looking at two different methods to make images that contain within them the two things that we do in photography, sharp images that are multiply reproducible, but neither of them had both parts of the puzzle.

What's more interesting still is that the public became so fascinated with Daguerre's incredibly crystalline sharp images that Fox Talbot sort of disappears into the woodwork. It doesn't really completely disappear, but for all intents and purposes, the Daguerreotype is the thing that comes to the fore. So Daguerre's process, which he named humbly after himself, the Daguerreotype ... it's French ... there aren't any French in the room, are there? Still got to drink wine so we don't want to ....

So Daguerre's process ascends. Now, what that meant was that for the first number of years of photography, the first ten or so years that the medium existed, almost every photograph made was a Daguerreotype. Think about this. Every Daguerreotype is a singular one-of-a-kind image, right? Just like a Polaroid. If I want to make five pictures of one of these people, I have to stand with the camera and make five separate plates so that I could distribute them to five separate people. So it's particularly well-suited for portraiture because

portraits are not things that we necessarily, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century mind, needed to distribute very much. We didn't have to pass them around.

Just as an interesting note, and we'll come back to some of these ideas here ... anybody recognize the guy in the center?

Audience: [Inaudible 00:20:31].

Jeff: Nope. Ralph Waldo Emerson. A naturalist, right? One of the things that actually I spend an entire class period in my History of Photography class talking about is this relationship between transcendentalism and naturalism and the portrait image, but we'll gloss past that for now and go on to the idea that landscape, or natural world photographs, were not particularly common with Daguerreotype imagery.

Think about it. If I had the picture like Platt Babbit's picture here, the Daguerreotype on the right of Niagara Falls, and I wanted to give one to Fred and one to Barbara and one to John, and so forth and so on, I'd have to stand there and make multiple images or I'd have to copy the image. Anybody ever tried to copy a photograph, right? It's doable, but there are some qualitative degradations each iteration you go along, and of course, if I made multiple images standing in front of the Niagara Falls, the people are going to change position and the sky's going to change and a bunch of other elements in the photograph will change over time.

So there is that other part of the dilemma, that the Daguerreotype was not well-suited to natural world photography or to any kind of photography really that wasn't a picture of a person, because if the idea was to be able to take that image and share your vision, you the photographer's vision, with the rest of the world, well, you had a problem. You had a problem because this medium was still one of a kind, and just as importantly, it was small. The Daguerreotype itself was rarely bigger than about two or three inches by three or four inches, sometimes a little bit bigger than that, but not generally terribly much bigger than that.

Natural world photographs were not particularly common in the first years of photography. However, the Daguerreotype, as an image, was seen by the people who looked at it as being what they called 'nature herself'. They really thought of that. They really thought, and if you've ever had the pleasure of seeing a Daguerreotype live, there is a sort of presence to these images, a presence that is unmatched, believe it or not, by even the greatest of modern technologies. There has never been a process in photography that rivals the sort of sharpness and presence and clarity of the Daguerreotype image. Nothing. It's

kind of amazing that we haven't gotten any better in 160-some years, but we haven't.

People who saw Daguerreotypes called them 'nature herself'. It's as if nature herself was there in the palm of my hand, frozen in time, for prolonged viewing and contemplation at later and later times. It wasn't until 1851 when a British guy named Archer came up with the ability to make negatives on glass. Now we have the same possibilities that Fox Talbot had had, of making a negative from which you could make multiple iterations of positives, but we didn't have the drawback of the paper fibers.

So this Archer guy came up with this methodology and it made high-quality reproductions of images possible, and photography began to travel. It began to leave the place where it was, and began to go around the world and show people the world.

Now, a couple of interesting things about this. One is that this is happening middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the same time period when we're dealing with a tremendous technological change. We've got steamships. We've got railroads. We've got canals being dug and we have people who were and more interested in going out all over the world and seeing what's out there, because they're now able to go out. It's now possible to go and take the train 300 miles. A 300-mile journey that might have taken weeks and weeks and weeks now takes just a matter of a day or two.

The idea of being able to travel is huge and so what we get in these early photographs is photographs of early travel photographs, these photographs that aren't necessarily what you and I might think of as landscape photographs, because they are really traveling to the great wonders of the world and returning with them from wherever they've come, Boston, New York, Chicago, wherever, returning with these samples of the way the world really looked.

There's also a whole big chunk of this that has to do with how people's trust in imagery that had previously been posited paintings and drawings, their trust in those images began to wane because once you'd seen the way this particular structure in India in the lower left corner looked, a painted image of it that left out a lot of details just wasn't going to fly.

Another interesting aspect of this glass negative deal, though, was that in order to produce the images, the photographer needed to bring with him all of the material necessary to make the photographs. So they had to bring an entire darkroom with them because they had to coat the plate just before exposure and develop the plate just after exposure, before the plate dried out. So it was not a sort of casual walk in the park. It was very much a huge undertaking of

bringing along hundreds and hundreds of pounds of equipment to go and make just two or three photographs. So next time somebody says, "You really should use a tripod," don't complain, because these guys were bringing along with them enormous amounts of stuff.

One other huge advantage that the glass plate had, and it's seen here in the right top corner, that's William Henry Jackson ... we'll look at some of his images here in a minute ... is that it was able to be as big as you wanted to make it, but there was one drawback. The negative had to be the size you wanted the print to be. So if you wanted an 11 x 14 inch photograph, you had to make an 11 x 14 inch negative; 16 x 20 inch photograph, 16 x 20 inch negative. Jackson, standing in front of his 20 x 24 inch camera, to be able to come back with a negative 20 x 24 inches, because the material that they were printing them on was too slow to enable them to do any enlargement of any sort, so this is a whole 'nother part of the deal.

Yet photography began to go all over the world and show people lots and lots and lots of things. In the late 1800s, Timothy O'Sullivan and other photographers were commissioned by railroad companies and other organizations to photograph the American west, in the hope that people would see the photographs and want to travel by rail or to go out and participate in the enterprises that these other companies were engaged in, mining activities and so forth, that they would want to go and see these majestic landscapes for themselves.

City life was becoming more difficult in the middle to the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the industrial revolution began to take hold more and more and more and cities were becoming busier, dirtier, different from the way they had been previously. So people began to go out there and to entice them to do so, we began to get photographers like Timothy O'Sullivan, making photographs that conveyed this sense of majesty of the American west.

We have to remember that at this time period, the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, between where we're sitting right now and the west coast is largely uninhabited and largely unexplored. It had begun to become mapped, however, and people were beginning to think that the frontier was closing. There was a real kind of fear that the frontier would close. An 1890 census in fact showed that no large tracts of land remained uncharted. So the idea that the frontier was beginning to close in on people helped create the sort of popularity of these images.

Another aspect of this that was interesting, I just talked about these very large cameras. Well, small cameras were also employed, not only to break up the marketplace because you could only sell so many of the large pictures ... you'd

need to sell some that were smaller ... but also because stereoscopic images became extremely important.

The way I always like to think about stereoscopic images is, if you lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the 1850s, '60s and '70s, and you didn't have a collection of stereoscopic views and a viewer, it would be very much like living in today's time, in 2008, and not having a television. It's doable, and I know some people who do that, but it's not what normally would be considered acceptable, right? You walk into somebody's house and there's a news event or a game or something on and, "Hey, where's the TV? I want to check the ..." "Well, we don't have one." So the idea of the stereoscopic image was extremely important.

These images were made with the camera or cameras like the one on the left, a twin-lens camera, with the lenses set apart about the same distance as the human eyes, two photographs made simultaneously on a single glass plate. The images were then viewed later in a viewer that segregated, with a septum, the left image from the right image, and recreated the illusion of depth. Some of us may know it better from View-Master. I had one when I was a kid. My kids had one, and some of us may know it better from stereoscopic images like these, but the idea is that this was an incredibly important and an extremely popular method of producing images.

One of the things that these images did, those of you who have looked at stereoscopic images can put this in your head, and a sort of equivalent I often think of is putting stereo headphones on. You know how when you put stereo headphones on, the music no longer seems to be coming from speakers in front of you, but somehow seems to be inside your head in this odd way that you can't really describe, but it no longer really seems like music coming from something in front of you?

So, stereoscopic images had that sort of illusion of depth with astonishing detail, and stereographs allowed the everyday American to experience the western wilderness and inspired a spiritualized, romanticized love of those places, a spiritualized love of the world and a love of these natural places.

Stereographs also set expectations for people who went out to these places, expectations that caused those people who saw these images and then traveled to these places to find those scenes ... I'm back to our image here ... to find those scenes and stand in those places and see if they could recreate the experience that they saw when looking at their stereoscopic images.

Creating those images was incredibly big business. There were many of the producers of these stereoscopic images who were turning out several hundred

thousand images each day, not each week, not each month, not each year, several hundred thousand images a day, such was the popularity of these things. Because of that, scenery began to be commoditized. We began to get the idea of buying the scene, buying something that would recreate and reconnect us with the natural world, so scenery being packaged and sold to the public on an enormous scale, huge giant scale.

Because the photographers who were out there traveling, especially in the American west, were often part of survey expeditions, much of what we see in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that we would maybe think of as being natural world photography is in fact documentary photography or evidentiary photography. Here are the things we found out there. I always like to think about this guy lying at the edge of a geyser and think about how many eruptions of the geyser they counted off in the time between them because here they are with their giant cameras and all their apparatus. I like to think about that. "Let's see, it only went off three times in the last four hours, so I guess we've got enough time to make the picture."

The aura of an object or a place tends to connect one to persons and practices that preceded that present era. In other words, when we go into the world, and we go out into nature, into the landscape, we tend to feel ourselves connected with some more distant past segment of ourselves, of humanity in some way, and one of the things that was interesting about these photographs of the American west specifically was that America emerged as a paradox, kind of an odd paradox at that, a nation whose identity conjures up images of wilderness, and the idea of image and wilderness are both important, because remember that part of the reason for making these photographs in the first place was to show people how majestic this was so they would go to it.

That was the objective of the photographs. You must see this photograph so that you will want to go to that place. The work by these photographers we've been looking at, Carleton Watkins and Timothy O'Sullivan, and later Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, who we'll look at here in just a minute, contributed to a popular support for establishment of national parks and also embedded in the American consciousness visions of wilderness landscapes that most would never visit, but would nevertheless embrace as being emblems of our culture and of our nation, a very important part of this.

The west, as a general idea, became a symbol of pure spiritual experience. The idea of man in nature and nature in man were extremely important and very tied together. One of the things that's always interesting, I think, to a lot of people is that when we see this photograph of El Capitan, we often assume that Ansel Adams is the photographer of that site, but in fact, Watkins was there almost a full 50 or 60 years before Adams got there.

Moreover, photographers of Yosemite Valley were sort of at the zenith of these photographers of the American west because the Yosemite was seen by Americans in that time period, the middle to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as being the perfect garden, as literally being Eden on Earth, the understanding that this is what we had, this perfect, pristine, untouched wilderness experience. Photographs were spiritual imagery for leisure consumption. I've always loved this photograph by William Henry Jackson because who amongst us has not been struck by light breaking across grass in the early morning or late afternoon, and I just love the idea that Jackson includes himself here in the photograph in shadow.

Then this other idea about all of the photographs we've looked at so far have been monochromatic, because photography as an early practice did not involve the use of color. So here we have an image that is hand colored, color added back to the image.

Nature had become our national cathedral, and I think it was necessary for a young country like ours that had no manmade monument to the spiritual world. This photograph, William Henry Jackson's *Mountain of the Holy Cross*, is probably the most emblematic photograph of its time period, certainly the best known picture that Jackson produced. The reason, of course, is the cruciform that occurs in the side of the mountain as the snow melts in the spring and the idea that from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century person's point of view, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century person who revered nature as being something that got them closer to the 'other', the spiritual, this was clear and present evidence of God's presence in the world.

Moving on, we get to pictorialism, which is like a rebirth in some ways, photographically, of the old idea of romanticism in painting, images that contain not only atmospheric emotion, but also convey some sort of sense of allegory. So it wasn't just that these pictures were pictures of the lotus or of the field with trees, but that they could represent some emotional state. Probably a better example even still is Steichen's *The Pond*, from 1904. Pictorialist photographers were very much involved in the idea of emotion, very much involved in the idea of the atmospheric effects they could create using a variety of different photographic processes.

It's not beside the point that by the 1900s, photography had become very familiar. Lots of people were doing it. Prior to that time, photography had been the province of just a few, a small number of people, and now these photographers begin to distance themselves from others by producing images that are so different.

Next we come upon this idea that begins in the 1930s of precisionism, modernism, crisp, clear photographs, Paul Strand among the first photographers

to look at photography as a cerebral exercise, choosing when to release the shutter depending upon the sense of becoming one with the subject. Strand's idea was taken up by Edward Weston who began making photographs on Point Lobos and other parts of his California home, born here in Illinois but migrated to California.

Weston's idea of pre-visualization, thinking in the mind's eye, what the final photograph would look like when it was finished; his idea of pre-visualization and later Adams's [Inaudible 00:40:29] system suggested that choosing image tones was an emotional experience, not necessarily a technical experience. "The photograph isolates and perpetuates a moment of time," said Edward Weston, "an important and revealing moment or an unimportant and meaningless one, depending on the photographer's understanding of his subject and the mastery of his process."

There's Edward Weston saying that what photography depended upon was our understanding of what the subject was. Weston, of course, along with Adams and a number of other photographers of the west coast, came up with a group of photographers, like-minded photographers, that called themselves Group f/64, espousing incredibly sharp focus, great depth of field, everything in the photograph being sharply focused and carefully considered.

I had mentioned Deborah Bright earlier, the author of this article about the natural world and photography. Deborah Bright puts it this way. She said, "Had Edward Weston and Ansel Adams not come along when they did, they would have had to have been invented." I kind of like that, because what she goes on to say is that as Californians, they begin to popularize American natural and national landscapes. They wrote articles in periodicals espousing their theories and their ideas, and Adams' epic landscapes were a welcome antidote to widely circulated images of the horrors of World War II. That sort of pristine beauty acted as a counterpoint to those photographs that were so horrific.

Adams had a strong desire to have his photographs restore the lost experience of nature that had become corrupted by post-war tourism because, remember those photographs that were cajoling people to go to the American west? Well, by golly, they worked, and suddenly there were hordes of people in a newly mobile American public traveling to the west and seeing those sights for themselves, and not coincidentally, inhabiting the uninhabited areas.

Adams linked up with John Muir and the ideas of naturalism, trying to attempt to right the wrongs of mass tourism and maintain a kind of a pristine wilderness. Photographer Eliot Porter, [Inaudible 00:43:02], not sure what happened there ... Eliot Porter began to use color photographs to convey some of the same sentiments that Weston and Adams had tried to convey. Conservationists were

confident that after seeing the work of Adams and Weston and Porter and lots of other photographers working in this same strategy, and seeing those photographs in things like periodicals and coffee table books, that the need for preservation of wilderness would be obvious. Who wouldn't want to preserve these things that we see in these photographs.

The Sierra Club, which was John Muir's vessel for dissemination of preservationist rhetoric, continues to use this type of images today, to help us understand what it is that we would miss should we destroy these pieces of the wilderness.

Contemporary keepers of this modernist aesthetic, the romantic flame, are photographers like Wolfe and Raul and Munch, the idea that what we're looking at when we look at them is a continuation of that whole notion that Adams and Strand and Weston began in the 1930s.

In 1962, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring Essays* were published which spread awareness of toxic chemicals like DDT and other pesticides. The late 1960s and early 1970s brought concern over global population growth, as well as counterculture revolutions that began to place an emphasis on the Earth and the way the Earth works and the way it might not work if we don't treat it correctly; 1973 brought the OPEC oil crisis and in '76, Jimmy Carter was elected U.S. President in part because he advocated alternative energy policies, those policies that were then overthrown by subsequent administrations.

What we get in photography is a continued exploration of the idea of nature, but pushing the idea of nature farther and farther from the pristine wilderness, here Eric Meola, Ernst Haas, Pete Turner, taking the real a bit farther along.

Then, this next bit, an exhibition in 1975 called *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*. It's an exhibition that happened at the George Eastman house, one of the most important photographic collections and museums in the world, and the show was curated by a guy named William Jenkins. It had a rippling effect on the whole medium and the whole genre of landscape or natural world photography, not only in the United States, but all over the world, in Europe, in South America, as well.

The new topographic photography questioned the supposed distinction between cultural and natural landscapes. What it began to suggest is that the natural world, because it was now inhabited, because it had now all been charted, was a cultural landscape as much as it was a natural landscape, that the natural world wasn't any different anymore than the cultural world was. In part they wanted to ironically comment on the images of the pristine wilderness, especially those made for the U.S. Geological Survey by photographers like Jackson and Carlton

Watkins, whose images we just looked at. The idea of calling it topographic, certainly those photographers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were topographers, right?

Their objective was to show us the way the land looked, so they're commenting on past images of pristine wilderness. They're commenting on alteration of terrain since those past images, and how the world had changed, and they're also looking at what they called the ARAT, 'another rock, another tree' tradition, the idea that the photographs that needed to be made in their mind were not another photograph of another rock or another tree. It was something different.

So this new generation of photographers was turning away from that idea, that idea of another rock, another tree, and for these photographers, it wasn't so much what the photographs were of so much as it was about what they were about. The subjects of the pictures were a lot less important than the idea behind them.

The pictures may be of western landscapes and trees and deserts and buildings, but they're also about the aesthetics of landscape photography and about a manmade wilderness. They play with the idea that the west was ever pristine, and they remind us that even the 19<sup>th</sup>-century photographers, the ones we just finished looking at, left footprints in the wilderness. The wilderness was not wild after those people were there. It was done being wild and so what we get are photographs like these. Robert Adams. The pictures are not pretty in the traditional sense of photographs of the landscape, but they conveyed a remarkable amount of information.

They also seemed to not be very concerned about being important in any way, as if the subject and the picture of it were not inherently interesting, which was an oddity in the photographic world. The photographers preserved the black and white fine print aesthetic of Weston and Adams. The photographs looked so beautifully exactly like those photographs in terms of technique, but were so completely different in terms of subject, quite obviously, that they were well off the beaten path of what could be called landscape or even natural world photography.

The photographs turned the idea of nature as refuge from civilization on its head by suggesting that there was no longer any nature out there. Steven Shore hammered the point home by using color to place us more solidly in the environment and to make us understand that this was the world that we lived in every day, that this was, to his mind, our natural world.

The modern keepers of this idea of the topographic flame are photographers like Jeff Wall. Anybody see his massive print exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago? Pictures as big as the side of your house, just about. And Alex Soth,

photographers who are working within this idea of topography, as well as Brad Moore, a photographer who's just come to light. Very interesting photographer looking at the way in which we manipulate landscape.

These last couple of photographers I'm going to let speak for themselves. I hope the volume is right on the speakers, but I've got a couple of people that I want you to see their work, and see what you think, because these are people who are working right now and making some images that I think are what we would see as contemporary nature photography.

Edward: I became very interested in landscape as a [Inaudible 00:50:03] medium. We had this [Inaudible 00:50:05] and it was a pretty small population and my father was an avid outdoorsman, so I really had a chance to experience that. I could never really understand exactly what it was or how it was informing me, but what I think it was telling me was that we are this transient thing that's happening and that the nature that you see out there, the untouched shorelines, the untouched forests that I was able to see, really bring in a sense of that geological time, that this has gone on for a long time and we're experiencing it in a different way, and that to me was a reference point that I think I needed to have to be able to make the work that I did.

[Inaudible 00:50:50] and I did this [Inaudible 00:50:52] coming through in the spring along the roadside and this rebirth of grass and then I went out for years trying to photograph the pristine landscape, but at [Inaudible 00:51:04], I somehow felt that it wouldn't catch on out there, that there would be a problem with trying to make this as a career and I kept being sucked into the genre of the calendar picture or something of that nature. I couldn't get away from it, so I started to think of how could I rethink landscape.

So I started to rethink the landscape as the landscape that we transform. I had a bit of an epiphany being lost in Pennsylvania. I took a left turn trying to get back to the highway and I ended up in a town called Frackville, and I got out of the car and I stood up and it's a coal mining town and I did a 360 turn-around, and that became one of the most surreal landscapes I've ever seen, totally transformed by man, and that got me to go up and look at mines like this, go out and look at the largest industrial incursions in the landscape that I could find, and that became the baseline of what I've been doing.

It also became the theme that I felt that I could hold onto and not have to reinvent myself, that this thing was large enough to become a life's work, to become something that I could sink my teeth into and just research and find out where these industries are.

I think one of the things I also wanted to say [Inaudible 00:52:21] was to thank all the corporations who helped me get in, because it took negotiation for almost every one of these photographs to get into that place to make those photographs, and if it wasn't for those people letting me in, at the heads of those corporations, I would have never made this body of work.

So in that respect, to me, I'm not against the corporation. I own a corporation. I work with them, and I feel that we all need them and they're important, but I am also for sustainability, so there's this thing that is pulling me in both directions and I'm not making an indictment towards what's happening here, but it is a slow progression.

So I started thinking, well, we lived in all these ages of man, the Stone Age and the Iron Age and the Copper Age, and these ages of man are still at work today, but we've become totally disconnected from them. There's something that we're not seeing there and it's a scary thing as well, because when we start looking at the collective appetite for our lifestyles and what we're doing to that landscape, that to me is something that is a very sobering moment for me to contemplate.

Through my photographs, I'm hoping to be able to engage the audiences of my work and to come up to and not immediately be rejected by the image, not say, "Oh, my God," but to be challenged by it, to say, "Wow, this is beautiful on one level, but on the other level, this is scary. I shouldn't be enjoying it for pleasure."

Jeff: So there's Edward Burtynsky, contemporary photographer, and then lastly here ... let's hope lastly, there we go, Chris Jordan. He'll tell us about his work here.

Chris: [Crosstalk 00:54:12] from a GMC Yukon Denali SUV, I took pictures of a white one and a black one and a whole bunch of gray ones in between and tweaked around with the letters a little bit and I started assembling this one into a giant image of 24,000 GMC Denali logos, and this is Ansel Adams' famous photograph of Mt. McKinley in the Denali National Park. My hope for this one is to juxtapose the sacred Denali against the truly mundane Denali.

Jeff: He goes on to say that that number of Denalis is the number of Denalis sold every year in the United States, so the idea here that what we're after now is a sort of reexamination of what nature really is, and wilderness and nature are part of the natural world, but the natural world is no longer this untouched world that it once was, and perhaps our desire to photograph the land and to photograph natural forms comes from a desire to go back to that 19<sup>th</sup>-century impetus of positing our cathedral in the mountains and the streams and the trees of that world, rather than the manmade.

However, as these contemporary photographers have shown us, there's little that has not been touched by the hand of man and the world is completely covered with footprints, so it's now up to us to figure out how to take that natural world and convey those same kinds of messages that those 19<sup>th</sup>-century photographers were trying to convey, and that Adams and Muir were trying to work with of showing us the importance of the preservation of that land, but show it to us in a different way.

Thank you very much for coming. I appreciate your attention. Does anybody have any questions?

(Music)