

Ralf Michael Fischer/Philipp Freytag

Nature's Nation revisited

Images of the US American Landscape through Changing Times and Media

Preface

Particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth century, the landscape of the United States served as one of the most important settings for the construction and negotiation of national identity. However, related concepts like Frontier, Manifest Destiny, and Nature's Nation are still crucial to the perception and depiction of the country today – either embracing or rejecting its ideological implications. With regard to the enduring timeliness of this topic we held an international workshop at Eberhard Karls University's Department of Art History in Tübingen from November 11th to 13th in 2011. Entitled *Nature's Nation revisited – Visual Constructions of the American Landscape from the Civil War until Today*, it forms the foundation for this publication. The conference assembled representatives of Art History, American Studies, and Historical Studies from Germany and the United States in order to discuss the role of visual depictions, comprising media like painting, graphic arts, photography, and film, as well as Land Art, in the development, implementation, and negotiation of the concepts mentioned above. Our main focus lay on the cultural, historical and media conditions of images, more precisely, on their production, distribution, and reception. The aim was to achieve preferably nuanced insights into various historic depictions of the North American landscape, scrutinizing references to the different lines of tradition with respect to their specific historico-cultural contexts.

Due to the temporal distance between the workshop and the publication of our proceedings this bilingual volume represents rather a continuation of the presentations and discussions in 2011 than their documentation. Therefore, individual emphases or even entire topics have changed. Furthermore, two graduates (Joel Fischer and Johannes Krause), who helped to organize the workshop as students, have contributed additional papers. The articles follow a

chronological order, ranging from the end of the fifteenth century to the present. **Angela Miller** traces a significant shift in the understanding of nature through the centuries following the 'discovery' of America. In the beginning it was primarily visualized with respect to its aesthetic and physical controllability. During the nineteenth century a new paradigm occurred, defining nature as a sphere completely beyond human accessibility. **Joel Fischer** discusses specific pictorial concepts in the paintings of the Hudson River School that were derived from distinctive modes of depiction in prospering mass media like panorama, diorama, and the moving panorama. The aim of these intermedia references was to reach a wider audience and to sensitize it for the aesthetic potentials of nature. **Katherine Manthorne** also focuses on intermedia relations by showing how film directors of the silent era between 1896 and 1920 adopted traditional locations, iconographies, and representational conventions from the Hudson River School. **Johannes Krause** examines Frank Lloyd Wright's specific use of photographs taken by Clarence A. Fuermann of his Prairie Houses for an illustrated book by the German publisher Wasmuth in 1911. The author clarifies the influence of Wright's notion of a genuine US American architecture on the visual strategies that help to give a suburban architecture the appearance of organic structures in the wide Western landscapes. The understanding of landscape during the so-called Machine Age is addressed by **Andrea Diederichs** in her study of two main works by the Precisionist Charles Sheeler – *American Landscape* (1930) and *Classic Landscape* (1931). She examines the socio-critical potentials of the two paintings in order to challenge established notions of these icons of US American art history as apotheoses of technology and industrial progress. **Christoph Ribbat's** essay explores the close connections

between the US American topos of the road trip and the history of photography after World War II. He illuminates the contradictions between the perception of freedom and environmental pollution that permeate this topic. **Philipp Freytag** pursues a similar theme with his close reading of Robert Adams's photographic portrait of an allegedly nondescript truck stop at the Interstate 25 south of Denver. The photographer, however, intentionally renounces the popular clichés and pictorial patterns of contemporary highway culture. His photobook *Eden* (1999) rather presents this place, which is usually perceived as a transient space, as part of a historically grown cultural landscape, thereby conceiving a regionalist counter-narrative to the levelling dynamics of the Frontier. Finally, **Ralf Michael Fischer** discusses the paradoxes that characterize the concepts Frontier, Manifest Destiny, and Nature's Nation by demonstrating the contradictions between patriotic intentions, social criticism, and reflection on media in the *documenta* work *The Lost Frontier* (1997–2005) by West Coast artist Llyn Foulkes.

Despite the thematic diversity, all eight authors draw on a shared repertory of pictorial and ideological concepts, paintings and photographs, as well as scholarly points of reference. Crucial aspects of US American art and cultural history are thus being discussed from different perspectives and in different historical contexts. An overview of all the articles reveals striking interconnections that present the discussed works as elements of a close-knit, yet highly contradictory visual culture. The permanently recurring question for the intentions and strategies of depiction being used to visualize the US American landscape for specific audiences constitutes a common thread – thereby emphasizing the high influence of the specifics of different visual media like painting, film, photobook, and decidedly hybrid spatial works on the shape of any particular work of art. Simple explanations do not work due to many paradoxes that have to be beard. In particular this aspect makes evident the unabated fascination of the US American landscape together with its underlying discourses.

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Title

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