

The Picturesque and Sublime Sky

Throughout art history, the natural landscape has been used by artists to depict beauty, either using nature as a metaphor for emotions or as a simple will to show the beauty of the Earth. This has included the land, sea and sky, however it is the latter which interests me the most, as it the only constant. Human travels have taken people into the middle of vast continents or the middle of the ocean, and even into space, but the sky is the one constant that is anywhere you might go. With this in mind, I find it peculiar that it has been passed over by a large number of artists and critics.

Meanwhile, the theory of art has become more and more important with many critics coming forward and presenting new ideas with a wealth of different ways to interpret art. Out of this, the Picturesque and Sublime philosophies have become important ideas to understand in order to interpret the art of the last 300 years. It is possible to interpret earlier art under these philosophies or to interpret recent art under different ideals too, however I feel the Picturesque and Sublime ideals are some of the most complete when studying art. I also think these ideas relate to the sky more effectively than other ideas.

With this essay I intend to look at how the sky has been presented by some classic and contemporary photographers and put it into the terms of the Picturesque and the Sublime. I will look at the work of Alfred Stieglitz, Lynn Silverman and William Eggleston, three artists who display a number of different approaches, both philosophically and technically. Having such versatility between the artists will help me in putting the work into Picturesque and Sublime ideals.

The theory of the Picturesque and Sublime comes from efforts to theorise beauty. It has helped to define landscape art over the last two centuries, possibly influencing photographers and artists and certainly influencing the critics who discussed their work.

The Picturesque and the Sublime put in to use when looking at the sky is interesting to me. Throughout history most texts relating to these philosophies have centred on landscapes and seascapes, for example photographer Roger Fenton (Picturesque) and J.M.W. Turner (Sublime). I want to extend this way of interpreting work onto photographs of the sky, but first I will look at what each theory means.

Picturesque

The Picturesque is arguably the most prominent art philosophy amongst the 'normal' public. This theory originates in the study of what is beautiful, and grew in the nineteenth century as the world industrialised. The industrialisation of the world was important in the development of the Picturesque thinking because it made natural scenes less common in people's lives. The Picturesque became the natural scenes of beauty that people travelled to see, as noted in David Bate's 'Photography: The Key Concepts':

"The picturesque landscape was a calculated response to industrialization: to escape it...It was an industry whose very success in encouraging masses to visit these places, in turn, became precisely the activity that threatens to ruin the picturesque quality of those views."

The natural beauty of the countryside was becoming less common in people's daily lives as cities and towns grew into large industrial zones, which helped the growth of the tourist industry and in turn confirmed what people thought to be beautiful. The Picturesque countryside became something of an escape from every day life.

I find putting the sky into Picturesque terms interesting because of how much it has changed between the start of the Picturesque philosophy, the Industrial Revolution and today. I think it is something that has become much more accessible over time as efforts have been made to reduce pollution, making the sky more visible from city and town centres.

The sky to some level also has the same beautiful connotations as the countryside; a bright blue sky can be seen as a metaphor for happiness, whereas a clear night sky can be used for astrology and foretelling of good fortune.

Sublime

If the Picturesque shows comforting and relaxing scenes, then the Sublime shows scenes of fear and danger. While still beautiful, the Sublime entails a more sinister scene that calls on people's own fears. Like with the Picturesque, the Sublime has often been illustrated with the use of nature, particularly the sea that is made to look stormy and dangerous.

These scenes are made to look intimidating; often the dangerous sea will be shown with people in the scene who look small and fragile in comparison. This fear is described by Bate:

"The Sublime is something that threatens to overwhelm you and causes fear, but as a spectator the threat is at a level that can be tolerated. It is about the capacity to be fearful, but not being absolutely overwhelmed, of still being able to tolerate and contain it."

The sky has been used in Sublime theory, usually with storm clouds used as a metaphor for anger or danger; this is something I will look at during this essay. When looking at the sky you can also use space and the stars in a Sublime sense, space can be destructive to us at any point, and images of it have shown the sheer mass in comparison to the Earth and people. These images appear intimidating, which acts on the fear of the viewer.

Alfred Stieglitz

As with all of Alfred Stieglitz's work, his photographs of the sky are usually seen as emotional pieces of work. The text accompanying *American, 1922* (Figure 1) on the J. Paul Getty Museum's website matter-of-factly states:

"This foreboding landscape with its dominating, brooding black sky evokes the personal, familial tumult then occurring in Stieglitz's life."

It is true that the photograph and others similar to it were made during a tumultuous period of Stieglitz's life, as his mother died around the same time the photograph was made, however the above quote differs from Stieglitz's own reasons for making the photo. The same description of the photo lists the reason Stieglitz claimed he originally began photographing the sky:

“I had told Miss [Georgia] O’Keeffe I wanted a series of photographs which when seen by [composer] Ernest Bloch he would exclaim: Music! music! Man, why that is music!”

This creates two different options of relating the image to Picturesque and Sublime ideals. If the image was to be seen as music, I believe this would directly relate it to the Picturesque. For an image to be read as an entirely different medium such as music, and to stimulate a different set of senses, I think it has to be seen as overwhelmingly beautiful. This may lead away from the idea that the photograph is a reflection of Stieglitz’s depression over the death of his mother.



Figure 1: Alfred Stieglitz; *American*, 1922

In my opinion, the writer’s assertion that the photograph *is* a reflection of the artist’s depression is a Sublime interpretation. The sky is described as foreboding (which literally means a fear that something bad will occur) and brooding (to lament, worry and feel troubled). To have these emotions conveyed through something so vast as the sky, and to have the sky shown in the photo be so much larger than the house so that it overpowers it, relates directly to the feeling of fear associated with the Sublime philosophy.

It is also possible that Stieglitz offered technical reasons for starting his work on the sky:

“Thirty-five or more years ago I spent a few days in Murren (Switzerland), and I was experimenting with ortho plates. Clouds and their relationship to the rest of the world, and clouds for themselves, interested me, and clouds which were most

difficult to photograph – nearly impossible. Ever since then clouds have been in my minds most powerfully at times, and I always knew I'd follow up the experiment made over thirty-five years ago...I wanted to photograph clouds to find out what I had learned in forty years about photography.” (1973:143)

So as well as the different ways of interpreting the work mentioned above, it is possible that a major reason for Stieglitz's *Equivalents* was to improve his technical ability. If this is the case, the work serves to show that Stieglitz was successful in his attempts to improve his ability, the quality is noticeably better in *Equivalent, 1926* (Figure 2) than in *American, 1922*. Much more detail is captured in the sky, including the moon and shadows on the clouds. The contrast is much sharper, with no important details lost in the sky, whereas the dark part of the cloud lacks detail in *American, 1922*.



Figure 2: Alfred Stieglitz; *Equivalent, 1926*

Lynn Silverman



Figure 3: Lynn Silverman; *from 1:1 series*

Lynn Silverman's work is very similar in appearance to the later work of Alfred Stieglitz, in that they show a very high contrast, are in portrait format and are black and white. However, the work becomes more distinctive when more of it is seen. The photographer aimed to show cloud formations and did so by placing them at the bottom of the frame. This helps to create the contrast, with the rest of the frame filled by the dark sky.

The work draws more similarities with Stieglitz' in it's motivations, which seem to be very philosophical. Her website states:

“The ambiguity of the image and the disorientation experienced by the spectator raise questions about the role of artifice in our perception of nature.”

Silverman's work seems immediately to appeal to the Picturesque way of thinking.

Taking Figure 1 as an example,

we can see the cloud looking very delicate in comparison to the huge amount of open space shown in the frame. With the cloud as the focus, the deep black sky becomes interesting, seeming to work towards either a Picturesque interpretation *or* a Sublime one. It could be interpreted in two very different ways:

- As a device to emphasise the cloud, which in turn emphasises the beauty of the photograph, to a Picturesque interpretation, or
- As something that overwhelms and engulfs the cloud, making it appear tiny and fragile. This creates a Sublime interpretation.

This difference, while not directly mentioned in terms of the Picturesque and Sublime, is noted by Jean Fisher in her essay for Portfolio magazine:

“There is a comfort, at first, standing in front of Lynn's photographs of sky and clouds. They seem to mime the position and scale of my body, like portraits. They do not overwhelm or threaten. Indeed, the first image instills a sense of airiness and lightness of being – like a summer sky. And yet, in my passage through the images I begin to feel their differences, and an unease – or perhaps an uncertainty – gradually unfolds me. Here, the black field has an alluring density; it would absorb me were it

not for a certain resistance of the surface, and the band of cloud at the foot of the image, which anchors me this side of the picture plane. And there, a reversal appears to take place; the blackness which elsewhere seems to be sky is now a brooding pall of cloud trailing an ominous scud.”

William Eggleston

William Eggleston’s work is much harder to define than that of Alfred Stieglitz and Lynn Silverman. His work on the sky, titled *Wedgwood Blue*, is much less documented, although within the context of his wider catalogue of work it is easier to understand. Eggleston is notable for his use of colour in the 1970s, when photography was still predominantly made black and white. Eggleston’s work was very controversial because of this use of colour, being described as “Perfectly banal, perhaps. Perfectly boring, certainly.” (The Genius of Photography, 2007).



Figure 4: William Eggleston; '*Wedgwood Blue*'

The use of colour is also in sharp contrast to the other artists I have shown in this essay, who used black and white to accentuate the contrast in their photographs. Colour is something I find interesting in this work (and the rest of Eggleston’s work), it is debateable how important it is. In ‘The Genius of Photography’, Gerry Badger argues:

“One thing is certain. Eggleston’s work is not about colour. He uses colour and all that it can give formally and psychologically to an image, yet he does not let it overwhelm content...Colour was an additional element; it gave another level of meaning, one that many photographers now chose to deal with in their work.”

The last part of the quote is interesting to me. Although the work may not have been intended to be about colour itself, the fact that more photographers chose to follow the

same path possibly shows how many in photography community understood the work. Colour may have been just “another *level* of meaning” for Eggleston, however it is arguable that this is the whole meaning of the work for the wider photography community.

Putting the work into Picturesque and Sublime interpretations is something that has interested me a lot while looking at the sky. Eggleston’s ‘Wedgwood Blue’ fits into a Picturesque philosophy very easily, with a very soft blend between the blue sky and white clouds. To fit it into a Sublime way of thinking is much more difficult, even more so than the Lynn Silverman example I showed. It could be argued that the sky, being so vast and large, could be read as a Sublime piece of work, however it is hard to see a sky like this as something daunting. If anything, the bright colour and blend refers to the summertime, which is traditionally read as relaxing and easy going.

Conclusion

I have only looked at three artists out of the thousands who have practised some form of landscape art, however I feel this illustrates the basic ideals of the Picturesque and Sublime in an area of art that relatively untouched – the sky. This is by no means a conclusive piece of work; there are too many artists, critics and theories for anything to be truly conclusive here, in my opinion. There were only three artists presented here, however I feel this work is a good starting point, with the ideals laid out and put into some context.

The Picturesque and Sublime ideals can be used very well when looking at the sky because it is so adept at showing multiple things at once, particularly beauty and power. I think I have presented this idea fairly; again, don’t intend this work to be taken as fact, as mentioned in the essay there are simply too many different ideas for this to be fact.

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