

DE-REALIZING THE GRAND CANYON

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Americans have long identified themselves with the natural world, a truism that can be documented in popular and high brow literature, landscape painting, housing preferences, and perhaps most notably in the invention of national parks, beginning with Yellowstone in 1872.¹ The Grand Canyon is undoubtedly one of the most important of these parks. A 1974 Department of Commerce poll found that it was the most popular natural site, followed by Yellowstone and Niagara.² This popularity has created almost insurmountable problems for the Park Service, which is charged with preserving the site and, paradoxically, making it available to the public. Their experience of the park exemplifies what David Harvey terms the "space-time compression" of contemporary capitalism, in which the volatile fashions of modern consumerism are expressed in images and replications that increasingly substitute for the original.³

A famous destination is by definition known to tourists in advance, through visual images, countless descriptions, and word of mouth. Many contemporary visitors have seen the 1991 film

¹Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*. 3d. edition. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982. On pastoralism in literature, the classic work is Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965. On painting, see Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. On housing preferences, see Kenneth Jackson, *The Crabgrass Frontier*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* [2nd edition] Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1987, pp. 33-47. Yosemite was actually founded a few years earlier, but was not designated a national park, but rather came under Californian jurisdiction.

²"America's Magnificent Seven," *U. S. News and World Report*, April 21, 1975, pp. 56-57. The other four were Mt. McKinley, the California redwood trees, Hawaii's volcanos, and the Everglades.

³David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

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*Grand Canyon*⁴ which suggests the current status of America's most popular landscape. The film had quite a different name in Denmark, where it was advertised as *I Storbyens Hjerte*, or "in the heart of the big city." The Danish title accurately suggests that most of the film - and all of the dramatic action - takes place in megalopolous, in this case, Los Angeles. This name is in many ways logical enough, since the film hardly deals with nature, but concerns the tensions of race, family, and careers, in the intersecting lives of a mechanic, a lawyer, and a film producer. In contrast, the American title refers not to the action but to the cultural frame around it. The Grand Canyon is named or discussed three times during the film, but it is not seen until the very end, when all the protagonists pile into a van, drive to Arizona, and are united in their encounter with its immensity.⁵ The movie viewer is not actually told where they are driving, and on arrival the camera focuses on their faces, to show their reaction to the view. The immediate response is silence. Lines relax in the adult faces, and the sceptical look of the teenagers grudgingly gives way to wonder. No doubt this is appropriate to our age, as the object is subordinated to subjective response. Only at the last moment does the camera swing around, and the vista opens up. As the credits start to roll, the camera moves out over the Canyon to suggest the apparently infinite vistas that open up for the park visitor.

Ending in this way, the film takes for granted an American audience's familiarity with the Grand Canyon and its iconic status in their culture. This landscape stands over against the social and racial tensions of the modern city, functioning as an uplifting ideal, as a regenerative landscape, as a utopian alternative. But as the Danish retitling suggests, this contrast may be lost on European audiences. Even though they almost certainly have heard of the

⁴Lawrence Kasdan, *Grand Canyon*, Twentieth Century Fox, 1991. Major roles: Danny Glover, Kevin Kline, Steve Martin, Mary McDonnell, Mary-Louise Parker, and Alfre Woodard.

⁵The three references: (1) as the answer to a question on a televised quiz show; (2) in the Danny Glover monologue, discussed below; (3) in the middle of the film producer's (Steve Martin) diatribe about violence in contemporary society.

Grand Canyon, it does not have the same resonance. It is not a repository of ultimate cultural value. Instead, the European audience may choose to frame this film experience within other images of sprawling American cities and their problems, which occupy virtually the whole film. Outside the American cultural context, this celluloid visit to the Grand Canyon seems only a momentary union of disparate people anxious to escape from urban problems.

During the film the American view is articulated by a mechanic (played by Danny Glover) as he sits outside his towing service station. He has just rescued a car and its driver from a gang of young blacks. The two men sit talking about the incident, putting it in perspective. The mechanic eventually asks, "Have you ever been to the Grand Canyon?" The white lawyer (Kevin Kline) has not, but had "always meant to go." He supposes it must be beautiful. The mechanic then makes perhaps the longest speech in the film: "Its pretty all right, but that's not the thing of it. You can sit right on the edge of it, you know. I did it. I did everything. I went down in it, I stayed overnight there. But the thing that got me was sitting on the edge of that big old thing. Those rocks and those cliffs, rocks so old. It took so long for that thing to get to look like that. And it ain't done either. It happens right while you're sitting there watching it. It's happening right now while we're sitting here in this ugly town." He pauses to toss an emptied can of beer into the trash. "When you sit on the edge of that thing, you just realize what a joke we people are. We've got big heads, we got to thinking, but what we gonna do isn't going to matter all that much. I figure our time here means didley to those rocks. It's a split second we've been here. The whole lot of us. And one of us? That's a piece of time too small to give a name." The lawyer asks, "Are you trying to cheer me up?" "Yeah. Those rocks are laughin' at me. I can tell. Me and my worries. It's real humorous to that Grand Canyon. Hey, you know what I felt like? I felt like a gnat that lands on the ass of a cow that's chewing its cud next to the road that you ride by on at 70 miles an hour."⁶

⁶This exchange takes place during the twenty-first minute of the film.

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In this vernacular speech, Glover reprises one of the most common features of the sublime response to an immense natural object. Kant described it as the mathematical sublime. The mathematical sublime concerns that which is incomparably and absolutely great. Since every phenomena in nature is measurable, and therefore only relatively great in relation to other things, the infinity of the sublime ultimately is an idea, not a quality of the object itself. In the presence of the apparent infinity of the Grand Canyon, this vernacular American subject experiences weakness and insignificance, feeling like a "gnat on the ass of a cow." In this experience he passes through awe and a sense of insignificance, though like most of his contemporaries he does not seek or reach a heightened awareness of Kantian Reason. Such a tourist recuperates a sense of self-worth, but he does not do so because the mind is able to conceive something more powerful and immense than the senses can grasp.⁷ Rather, visiting the Canyon has a therapeutic function, making both his problems and his achievements insignificant. If the film *Grand Canyon* is a reliable guide, this particular version of the natural sublime remains alive in American culture. Undoubtedly some tourists ask stupid questions, such as how did the Native Americans make the canyon, but many are still awed and most of them evidently grasp the basic geologic principles that created it. However, these visitors do not seem to make a transcendental deduction from their experience. If they pass through the feelings of awe and insignificance, it is not to arrive at a conviction about their own thought processes. Rather, these contemporary tourists reach humility in the face of an apparently infinite object.⁸ This is by no means something new, but a secularization of nineteenth-century tradition.

⁷For a summary, see John Watson, *The Philosophy of Kant Explained*. Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1908. Facsimile reprint, New York: Garland, 1976, pp. 490-499.

⁸I make this argument at length in *American Technological Sublime*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994, chapter 1.

II

Nineteenth-century American tourism focused on natural wonders as representations of the nation. They served as a visible demonstration of the transcendental conception of nature and a sense of Manifest Destiny. As John Sears has noted: "The strong religious tradition of many Americans predisposed them to construct the symbolic landscape of their own country...America was the Promised Land; God had guided people to its shores for some transcendent purpose; America was the place where the millennial expectations of Christians would be fulfilled." Natural tourist attractions "provided points of mythic and national unity" in a nation without a state religion or ethnic homogeneity.⁹ Barbara Novak has emphasized how such landscapes as Niagara Falls, Yosemite, and Grand Canyon served as powerful counterpoints to European culture. "The opposition between Europe's antiquity and their own wilderness had given Americans an alternative past. They could not look back on a long tradition as could other cultures.... But they could relate to an antiquity still unspoiled by man - purer and by implication closer to God."¹⁰ The tourist who visited such natural sites experienced awe and personal insignificance, and learned to interpret these feelings in nationalist terms.

This ideology (or national civil religion) was well-developed by 1869, when John Wesley Powell made his famous expedition down the Colorado River, drawing national attention to the Grand Canyon for the first time. Until then the name "Grand Canyon" had only appeared on one map, made for a railway survey the year before,¹¹ and no one had descended the Colorado River, whose watercourse was the last large blank area on maps of the United States. Powell's ten man expedition disappeared for three months, and newspapers reported it a disaster. Powell emerged with five other survivors to read his newspaper obituary. His survival was deemed a sensation, and when his report of the expedition

⁹John Sears, *Sacred Places* New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰Barbara Novak, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

¹¹J. Donald Hughes, *In the House of Stone and Light: A Human History of the Grand Canyon*. Grand Canyon Natural History Association, 1978, p. 38.

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appeared, supplemented by articles in the popular press, the public learned of a fabulous canyon which dwarfed all other national landscapes.

Following Powell, many others celebrated the site. In the last decades of the nineteenth century a virtual who's-who of nature writers and celebrities came to see it. John Muir observed that visitors were struck dumb: "I have observed scenery-hunters of all sorts getting first views of Yosemite, glaciers, White Mountain ranges, etc. Mixed with the enthusiasm which such scenery naturally excites, there is often weak gushing, and many splutter aloud like little waterfalls. Here, for a few moments at least, there is silence, and all are in dead earnest, as if awed and hushed by an earthquake."¹² Mark Twain's neighbor and fellow novelist, Charles Dudley Warner concurred: "No one could be prepared for it. The scene is one to strike dumb with awe, or to unstring the nerves; one might stand in silent astonishment, another would burst into tears."¹³ Buffalo Bill wrote in a visitor's book that the Canyon was "too sublime for expression, too wonderful to behold without awe, and beyond all power of mortal description."¹⁴ These were characteristic sublime responses to the site, whose size and scale were such that no painting or photograph could adequately prepare the nineteenth century visitor for the encounter. Furthermore, this sublimity was seen as an attribute of America. Nationalism was a recurrent theme of those who recorded their impressions at the rim. One man declared, "Doubtless, God might have made something more wonderful or more magnificent, but doubtless he never did. America for Americans."¹⁵ A woman proudly proclaimed her credentials as a traveler and her judgement of the Canyon: "I have visited the whole world. I travel nine months in the year. I have

¹²John Muir, "The Grand Canyon," in Paul Schullery, ed., *The Grand Canyon: Early Impressions*. Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1981, pp. 77, 79.

¹³Charles Dudley Warner, in Schullery, p. 41.

¹⁴Captain John Hance, ed., *Personal Impressions of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River*. n.p. Whitaker and Ray, 1899, p. 52.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 90.

never seen anything so grand as a sunset view of the Grand Canyon...."¹⁶

There were few visitors before 1900, however. Between c. 1870 and c. 1920 photographs presented the spectacular western landscapes to a national audience. Photographs also played a role in the creation of the first national park at Yellowstone, as images made by William H. Jackson in 1871 were immediately displayed to the Members of Congress, who unanimously passed a bill creating a park the following year. In subsequent decades these images of the hot springs, geysers, and waterfalls were thought to have accomplished "a work which no other agency could do and doubtless convinced every one who saw them that the region where such wonders existed should be carefully preserved to the public forever."¹⁷ In fact, the written report and lectures of the Yellowstone expedition leader, F. V. Hayden played the decisive role.¹⁸ But the often-repeated tale about the impact of these photographs was enhanced by a naiveté characteristic of the nineteenth century. People thought that "the photographs were of immense value" precisely because while words could "exaggerate," the "camera told the truth; and in this case the truth was far more remarkable than exaggeration."¹⁹ Photographs were assumed to be truthful representations, which if anything understated the case, since they were in black and white. Photographers were so early on the scene that it was common for government expeditions to name mountains after them, including the newly trained Jack Hillers, who accompanied Colonel Powell on his second trip down the Colorado in 1872.²⁰ The year before Timothy O'Sullivan, the first photographer at the Grand Canyon, made several large plates and

¹⁶Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁷Cited in Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene*. New York: Dover Publications, 1964, p. 302.

¹⁸Howard Bossen, "A Tall Tale Retold: The Influence of the Photographs of William Henry Jackson on the Passage of the Yellowstone Park Act of 1872." *Studies in Visual Communication* 8, No. 1, (Winter 1982), pp. 98-109.

¹⁹Taft., p. 302.

²⁰John K. Hillers, "Photographed All the Best Scenery": *Jack Hillers's Diary of the Powell Expeditions, 1871-1875*. Don D. Fowler, ed. Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1972.

stereographs.²¹ Since expeditions seldom paid their photographers much, they made a living from the sale of reproductions, particularly stereographs, which were inexpensive and sold widely to eastern audiences.²² Before photographs were common in magazines and before the advent of film, stereographs conveyed a vivid three dimensional sense of the vast landscapes of the west.²³ In one generation they helped to make the Grand Canyon, unknown to the public in 1870, into a national icon. Powell himself played a central role in this process. Directed by the Smithsonian to hire a photographer for his 1871 expedition, he employed E. O. Beaman, who made 350 images before leaving. Beaman also contracted with Powell and the chief topographer of the expedition to share equally the reproductive rights to the stereographs. The following year Powell bought Beaman's share and thereafter profitted from the sales made by the Jarvis Company of Washington D.C.²⁴ By 1905 the Keystone View Company sold a set of stereographs under the title *A Scenic Tour of the United States* which presented Yosemite, Niagara Falls, and the Grand Canyon as quintessential natural landscapes, within a series of images that emphasized industrial progress, cities, and skyscrapers.²⁵ The Canyon was produced as proof that America was the home of the biggest and the best scenery, whether natural or man-made.

Paintings were at least as important as photographs in disseminating the glory of the Grand Canyon. Thomas Moran was invited by Powell himself to see the new landscape and he sketched the area in 1873, Moran then returned East, where he produced an enormous seven by twelve foot oil painting, as the companion to an

²¹Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock, *Landscape as Photograph*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 56.

²²Taft, p. 308.

²³See Richard N. Masteller, "Western Views in Eastern Parlors: The Contribution of the Stereograph Photographer to the Conquest of the West," *Prospects* 6, pp. 55-71.

²⁴Joni Louise Kinsey, *Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992, pp. 101-102.

²⁵Judith Babbitts, "A Stereographic View of the United States," in David E. Nye and Mick Gidley, eds. *American Photographs in Europe*, Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1994, p. 53.

equally large canvas of Yellowstone that Congress had purchased on its completion for 10,000 dollars and hung them in the capitol building. Moran's "The Chasms of the Colorado, 1873-1874" was immediately bought for the same price and hung nearby. Moran's sketches also appeared in Powell's official report on the Colorado, published in 1875. Thus from the moment of discovery artists were engaged in interpreting the Grand Canyon to the public.

Moran had been born in England, coming to America at the age of seven. Studying with the Philadelphia painter James Hamilton, he early admired the Turner school of landscape painting and the criticism of John Ruskin. Before painting the Grand Canyon he had examined Turner's work closely in England. Yet despite these influences, Moran did not wish to paint European scenery, but rather found it "an anomalous fact, that American artists are prone to seek the subjects for their art in foreign lands, to the almost entire exclusion of their own." Moran maintained that "no foreigner can imbue himself with a spirit of a country not his own. Therefore he should paint his own land."²⁶ His 1873 vision of the Grand Canyon is partially shrouded in clouds and mists. It is a depiction of primal chaos, containing the great chasm, a storm, and an incomplete rainbow near the center of the composition, suggesting an Edenic world emerging from the primal energies of creation.²⁷ A serpent and an American eagle underscore this mixture of the Book of Genesis and nationalism. The impressive rock formations are indistinct, and no scientist could deduce anything more than the existence of sedimentary layers near the top. The avoidance of literalness was precisely what Moran sought: "I place no value upon literal transcriptions of Nature. My general scope is not realistic; all my tendencies are toward idealization." The first great interpreter of the Grand Canyon concluded this passage by declaring, "Topography in art is valueless."²⁸ Moran was

²⁶Thoms Moran, "American Art and American Scenery," in *The Grand Canyon of the Arizona*, ed. Charles Higin, Passenger Department of the Sante Fe Railway, 1902, pp. 85-87.

²⁷Moran, "Chasm of the Colorado," 1873-1874, Department of the Interior. See Kinsey, pp. 111-116.

²⁸Cited in Kinsey, p. 15.

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disparaging geological drawings, which show every sedimentary bed and topological feature with the precision of an architect. Such colorless exactitude was common in early drawings of the Grand Canyon.²⁹ Moran demanded that the details of the scene be made subservient to a visionary transformation. Joni Kinsey's exhaustive study of the *Chasm of the Colorado* found that he assembled this "single view from a variety of vantage points and individual vignettes, often rearranging proportions and relationships to create what he called his 'impression.'"³⁰ He did not attempt to mirror a particular scene. Rather, he fused observation and memory with his stated conviction "that the cañons of this region would be a Book of Revelations in the rock-leaved Bible of geology."³¹

Photographers and painters together developed conventions in the depiction of the Canyon. Successful images were those that combined sublimity and geology, while emphasizing the enormous scale, almost invariably through inclusion of an already miniscule human figure in the near distance.³² Thus the Kolb Brothers who built a studio on the rim of the Canyon at the head of the main trail, did far more than make a living taking photographs of tourists.³³ The Kolbs knew Thomas Moran, and they shared images with him, and of course viewed his paintings. When the Kolbs made a river journey from Wyoming to the Grand Canyon, taking photographs all the way, Moran was one of the first people to see their prints, and the painter already knew the places they photographed, and could name them. The two mediums were not in conflict but complimentary.

All of these artists strove to convey the immensity of the scene, preferring broad views and high perspectives. Their work often

²⁹Hughes, pp. 38-40.

³⁰Kinsey, p. 117.

³¹Cited in Kinsey, p. 111.

³²For example, see Jack Hillers, "Grand Cañon, Colorado River, Arizona," Records of the Geological Survey 57-PS-66, National Archives.

³³Kolb, Ellsworth Leonardson, *Through the Grand Canyon from Wyoming to Mexico*, foreword by Owen Wister, New York: Macmillan, 1914. [copy in Swedish Royal Library]

adorned publications distributed by the major railroads. In the 1870s Moran provided engravings to *Scribner's* for Powell's articles on the discovery expedition, and these were frequently reprinted afterwards. Moran was also sought out by other magazines for more illustrations, and he contributed a series of them to the widely-read *Picturesque America*, the most lavish travel publication that appeared in the 1870s. The inclusion of several Morans here demonstrates how quickly the Grand Canyon became a national symbol, and how thoroughly a Turnerian aesthetic shaped the popular understanding of its meaning.

The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway also recognized the importance of artistic representations in luring passenger traffic to the Southwest in general and the Grand Canyon in particular. It began to use Moran illustrations as early as 1877, and increased their dissemination once it had built a branch line to the Grand Canyon and built the El Tovar Hotel and Bright Angel Lodge there, at a cost of \$500,000.³⁴ The railroad later began to finance annual trips by Moran and other artists, usually to the South Rim where they were given hotel rooms.³⁵ Indeed, Moran returned to the Canyon each year from 1901 until his death in 1926, courtesy of the railroad, often in exchange for a painting. An outlook at the Park today is named after him. In 1901, the year that its rail line was completed to the South Rim, the Santa Fe Railway produced 174,000 copies of *Grand Cañon of Arizona*, 15,000 copies of a pamphlet, *Titan of Chasms: the Grand Canyon of Arizona*, and a smaller run of a 123 page anthology "of words from many pens" as well as artistic illustrations.³⁶ These publications included an essay and illustrations by Moran, and served as cultural markers encouraging Americans to visit their own scenery, almost

³⁴Keith L. Bryant, *History of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe*, New York: Macmillan, 1974, p. 120.

³⁵See Kinsey, pp. 132-134.

³⁶Charles A. Higgins, *Grand Cañon of Arizona*. Chicago: Passenger Department of the Santa Fe Route, 1901. Passenger department of the Santa Fe Railroad, *The Grand Canyon of Arizona; being a book of words from many pens, about the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River in Arizona*. Chicago, 1902. See also *Grand Canyon Outings*. Chicago: Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad Company, c. 1922, 46 p.

necessarily by railroad.³⁷ Other railroads serving the Southwest also reproduced Moran's work or found illustrations of a similar nature. Thus from the moment of its discovery, the Grand Canyon was represented in works of art, and became known through an aesthetic shaped by Ruskin and Turner, and more generally by the idea of the natural sublime.

The highways of 1902 were still so poor that an automobile trip to the Canyon was unthinkable except as a stunt. The first car (a steam-powered six wheeler) rattled from Flagstaff up to the South Rim in that year after a two day trip on dirt roads.³⁸ Long-distance travel by automobile remained rare until World War I, but by 1920 10,000 people drove to the Canyon. By this time the Grand Canyon was being proclaimed to be one of the *Three Wonderlands of the American West*³⁹ on a par with Yosemite, and Yellowstone, despite the fact that when it became a national park in 1919, fifty years after Powell's first expedition, only a tiny minority of Americans had seen it. Instead, they knew it from the paintings of Thomas Moran, Henry F. Farny and F. H. Lungren, and from the photographs of Jack Hillers, Timothy O'Sullivan, and the Kolb Brothers. All these images, like the tourism they promoted, emphasized the contemplation of Grand Canyon from the rim.

In the twentieth century static representations began to seem insufficient, and both cameramen and tourists became more intrusive. In the early decades of the century film crews arrived for the first time. The Ford Motor Company, which provided short subjects to movie theaters across the country, made a brief film of

³⁷Alfred Runte, *Trains of Discovery: Western Railroads and the National Parks*. Flagstaff, Arizona: Northland Press, 1984.

³⁸Thomas E. Way, *Destination: Grand Canyon: The Story of Travel to the Grand Canyon*. Phoenix: Golden West Publishers, 1990, p. 43-44.

³⁹Thomas Dowler Murphy, *Three Wonderlands of the American West: being the notes of a traveler, concerning the Yellowstone Park, the Yosemite National Park, and the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, with a chapter on the other wonders of the Great American West*. Boston : L. C. Page & Co., 1912. The volume includes sixteen reproductions in color from original paintings by Thomas Moran and thirty-two duogravures from photographs, as well as maps of the Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Grand Canyon. See also George Wharton James, *The Grand Canyon of Arizona; how to see it*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1910.

the Grand Canyon (1916, 1920), which began with a map of the Colorado River plateau and a diagram illustrating the sedimentary layers which the river had cut through. It then showed tourists on horseback descending into the canyon, following them down to the bottom. It portrayed what had become the typical visit to the site, down Bright Angel Trail to the Phantom Ranch.⁴⁰ Yet even as the mule trail became familiar, entirely new views of the Canyon were also becoming available. In 1919 the Army Air Service, seeking publicity for itself after World War I, began a series of flights across the United States to map air routes for commercial use. On February 24th of that year a DeHavilland DH-4 bomber flew over the Canyon, and its pilot found that "The river was like a pencil. Every wiggle, every shade every shadow of the giant gorge was visible at once and there is nothing comparable to it." The next day a second army plane carrying a Fox News motion picture photographer, cruised over the rim and dropped down 2,000 feet for a closer look.⁴¹

Even as the wire services hummed with the story, the next day Grand Canyon was officially made a National Park by Congress. The following year a dare-devil pilot flew within a hundred feet of the Colorado River itself, negotiating the tight confines of the inner canyon.⁴² In 1923 an extensive series of photographs was made over the entire length of the Canyon and several of these were published the following year in a special issue of the *National Geographic*, that was entirely devoted to this feat.⁴³ This literally added a new dimension to tourist knowledge of the site. However, there were few paying customers in the 1920s, and attempts to establish commercial air service failed financially until 1931, when the demand for aerial views had increased enough that Grand Canyon Airlines began regular flights.⁴⁴ This company entered into

⁴⁰Mayfield Bray, ed., *Guide to the Ford Film Collection in the National Archives*. Washington: 1970, p. 21.

⁴¹Ronald L. Warren, "Aviation at Grand Canyon: a 75-Year History," *Journal of Arizona History* 36:2 (Summer, 1995), pp. 151-152.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁴³*Natioanl Geographic Magazine*, vol. 46., July 1924, pp. 62-68.

⁴⁴Hughes, p. 100.

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a contract with the two park concessionaires, Fred Harvey Company and Utah Parks Company, granting them a percentage of sales in exchange for exclusive rights to provide air transport inside the park. Park superintendent M. R. Tillotson approved the arrangement.⁴⁵ When construction began on Hoover Dam business increased substantially, and while the companies changed over the years, the traffic increased, to the point where each year more than 800,000 people now see the Canyon from the air from the planes and helicopters of 40 different carriers.

As the possible Grand Canyon experiences increased, the tide of visitors swelled in all areas of Grand Canyon National Park, reaching 1 million in 1956, and increasing by almost 1 million per decade to 4.5 million in the 1990s. At first the Park Service attempted to provide sufficient accommodations and services for all visitors. By the late 1960s it became clear that such goals were unrealistic, and could do serious harm to the ecology of the Park. To see why, consider the development of the now famous boat trip through the rapids of the Canyon, which first became available in the 1940s, when this remained an exotic experience for the hardy tourist. As late as 1949 fewer than 100 people had ever made such a trip, and by 1964 less than 1000 had done so. Then, in the late 1960s such journeys became fashionable. In the single year of 1972 16,400 took the trip, most on rubber rafts. Such a large influx of visitors taxed the ecology of the arid environment, creating problems of waste disposal, camp fires, and the trampling of plants. In that year 132 river runners got dysentery because of poor sanitation. The Park Service established a limit of 14,000 river visitors per year, and required them to carry out all their waste, including used toilet paper. There is now a nine year waiting list.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the narrow beaches are crowded with campers at night, and investigators found that "human debris (food particles, plastic, pop tops, etc.) is being incorporated into the sand/silt deposits at rates that exceed purging capacities by natural means, causing beaches to

⁴⁵Warren, p. 161.

⁴⁶Hughes, p. 114.

look and smell like sandboxes in heavily used public parks."⁴⁷ The sudden increase in use coincided with the ecology movement. Americans seemed intent on destroying what they claimed to love. Nor was rafting the only area of new, intense activity. Hand gliding into the Canyon has also been tried, but is prohibited as being too dangerous. Guided snowmobile trips are permitted on the North Rim, which is otherwise closed in winter, and camping areas have been established near both rims and inside the gorge. Back-packing also rose to unprecedented levels and was restricted to 16,000 overnight permits per year, which created new waiting lists. By the early 1970s a wide range of "Grand Canyon experiences" had been established: the outlooks on both rims, the trails down to the Colorado River, the airplanes and helicopters overhead, snowmobiles on the North Rim, campgrounds, and the drama of river rafting. Few people had the time or opportunity to avail themselves of all of these.

Even as the park authorities attempted to deal with tourist pressures inside the Grand Canyon, development continued outside the gates, where a cluster of motels and services grew up. The national web of interstate highways made Arizona more accessible in the 1960s. At the same time, a new airport was established in middle 1960s, and then enlarged so that it could handle commercial jet planes. Waves of tourists poured in, and by the 1990s the Canyon's "crisis" had attracted national attention, including two stories in *Time Magazine*. It reported that national parks "have become plagued by much of the urban frenzy from which people try to flee in the first place." In response, the Park Service "decided to cut back sharply on visitors' access and creature comforts as a necessary cost of protecting the oasis for future generations."⁴⁸ Despite such aims, Grand Canyon still has serious problems. Those who manage to get a hotel room are urged not to take showers and to use as little water as possible. In the peak season 7,000 vehicles arrive each day to compete for only 1,500 parking places. The

⁴⁷Cited in Philip L. Fradkin, *A River No More: The Colorado River and the West*. Tucson: University of Arizona, 1984, p. 211.

⁴⁸"National Parks," *Time Magazine*, July 25, 1994. "Crunch Time at the Grand Canyon," July 3, 1995.

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number of people flying over the Canyon has doubled since 1987, which means that a plane or helicopter goes by once every 90 seconds. Should the tourist retreat to a restaurant there may be a two hour wait. In October, 1995 a "Guided Tour of the Park" available on World Wide Web advised browsers that, "The whole stretch of rim trail between the El Tovar [hotel] and the head of Bright Angel Trail will be a seething mass of people during the prime tourist season....The biggest part of the masses tend to congregate right outside the Bright Angel Lodge gift shop....It's sad to think that this is the only view of the Canyon that some people ever get to see."⁴⁹

It would be easy to amass similar quotations and conclude that the modern tourist is trapped in a commercial nightmare, compared to the more fortunate travelers of the nineteenth century. Such a conclusion would be nonsense. Niagara Falls in the 1850s was overrun with crowds who spent more time in gift shops and diverse popular amusements than in looking at the Falls themselves. One visitor complained: "Hawkers shouted on every corner. For a fee, guides offered to escort tourists down the treacherous gorge on foot trails to the base of the falls, and then collected an extra fee to lead them back up. Toll booths mushroomed, charging fees for access to areas along the overlooks walled from view by high board fences."⁵⁰ Another traveler noted that "A brisk trade in Indian ornaments and curiosities is carried on at Niagara," and many complained of the carnival atmosphere along its banks.⁵¹ Rather than look down our noses at "the seething mass" of people at the Grand Canyon, it is more useful to consider the difficulties these crowds confront. Today's visitors spend at best only a couple of hours looking at it, few descend to the bottom, and less than one in a hundred has the opportunity to overnight down

⁴⁹On the Grand Canyon Home Page, November, 1995, which can be found at: <http://www.primenet.com/~rogem/grandcy1.htm>

⁵⁰Cited in Christopher W. Lane, *Impressions of Niagara: The Charles Rand Penney Collection of Prints of Niagara Falls*. The Philadelphia Print Shoo, Ltd., 1993, p. 69.

⁵¹Charles Mason Dow, *Anthology and Bibliography of Niagara Falls*, 2 vols. Albany: State of New York, 1921, p. 1092 and passim.

there. While they may have expected to experience tranquillity and peace, they seldom have time or opportunity for ecstatic contemplation. Rather, they visit as many outlooks as they can, snap a few photographs, look for souvenirs, and later recollect and reprocess their experience.

On the whole there seem to be four major ways that the public makes the Canyon intelligible. These are not necessarily contradictory, and they probably emerge for most visitors in the following sequence. First and most obvious is awe, as depicted at the end of the film *Grand Canyon*. Muir early noted it, and so has virtually every subsequent commentator. John C. Van Dyke described the typical scene in 1920, when people usually arrived by train.

In common with the ordinary visitor, upon arrival you hurry up the steps from the station, pass along the front of the hotel, and go out at once to the Rim for a first view. You are impatient of delay in seeing this marvel of the world. Almost before you know it you are at the edge. The great abyss, without hint or warning, opens before your feet. For the moment the earth seems cleft in twain and you are left standing at the brink. As you pause there momentarily the rock platforms down below seem to heave, the buttes sway; even the opposite Rim of the Canyon undulates slightly. The depth yawns to engulf you. Instinctively you shrink back.⁵²

This immediate reaction to the sheer scale and complexity of the scene usually then leads to a second interpretative effort, to learn the names of some of the most striking formations visible in the distance. Many of these names are architectural metaphors, selected by the early white explorers. In almost no cases are they derived from traditions of the Native Americans. Muir declared: "Throughout this vast extent of wild architecture - nature's own capital city - there seem to be no ordinary dwellings." Since the 1870s, the canyon has been described in terms of temples, domes,

⁵²John C. Van Dyke, *The Grand Canyon of the Colorado: Recurrent Studies in Impressions and Appearances*. Foreword by Peter Wild. Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1992, reprint of Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920, p. 1.

De-Realizing the Grand Canyon

minarets, towers, walls, pillars, ruins, and the like. For many tourists, learning these names is a sufficient form of interpretation, and they feel the need to go no further. Yet a good percentage (like the garage mechanic played by Danny Glover) become intrigued with how water erosion carved the vast canyon. At this point merely looking is not sufficient, and the tourist must read a guide or hear a short lecture to learn the scientific explanations of the different rock formations. This task is made easier by the fact that each major grouping has a distinctive color. Even if the visitor does not master the details, he or she can quickly grasp the general concepts of sedimentary layers, a gradual rise in the plateau, and the eroding force of the Colorado River. In this interpretative tradition the Canyon is understood as the open book of nature, exposing to view the evolutionary history of the earth. The naturalist, John Burroughs, popularized this view, and he is still cited in Canyon hiking guides to this day: "Time, geologic time, looks out at us from the rocks as from no other objects in the landscape. Geological time! How the striking of the great clock, whose hours are millions of years, reverberates out of the abyss of the past!"⁵³ The contemporary tourist rapidly assimilates parts of each of these interpretative systems, acquiring some of the architectural names and gleaning facts about the geological history from maps, trail markers, pamphlets, campfire talks, and perhaps a guidebook.

Yet during the process of assimilating these schemes of interpretation, the tourist cannot avoid a feeling of being unable to see everything. The pressure of the crowds, the high cost of remaining for an adequate length of time, and the difficulty of finding any accommodations during peak periods, all encourage the search for short cuts, and here emerges the fourth mode of interpretation. If the nineteenth century tourist spent days at the site, the contemporary tourist seldom has that luxury. Instead, he or she looks at the canyon for a few hours, acquiring a basic understanding of the site and its vocabulary, which becomes

⁵³Cited in Stewart Aitchison, *A Naturalist's Guide to Hiking the Grand Canyon*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985, p. 20.

emotional raw material that can be worked up technologically, at the IMAX theater just outside the South entrance. To tourists facing the summer heat, inadequate parking, long lines, overbooked accommodations, a nine year waiting period to take a river-raft trip, and high costs, the air-conditioned theater with its quadraphonic sound seems decidedly attractive.

Yet at the same time that tourists want this cinematic compression and intensity, many contemporary tourists also want multifaceted contact with the natural environment in pristine condition. The unhappy discovery that Grand Canyon is overrun is often combined with a sense of anger that the powerful river that carved the Canyon no longer exists, but has been dammed up and siphoned off for irrigation. Its hydroelectric floods are determined by the demands of air-conditioners in Phoenix. Industrial civilization has touched and transformed the Canyon in a myriad ways, and the more one looks the greater the technological intrusion appears. In the nineteenth century nature functioned as a reservoir of cultural meanings and as the site of American national identity. Even as late as 1960 Wallace Stegner could call the canyon lands "a lovely and terrible wilderness, such a wilderness as Christ and the prophets went out into; harsh and beautifully colored, broken and worn until its bones are exposed, its great sky without a smudge or taint from Technocracy."⁵⁴

Today the Canyon can hardly be appreciated in these terms. This is not merely the old problem of the egotistical sublime, in which expectations outrun realities, nor is it merely the familiar degradation of a pristine site by mass tourism. Rather the Grand Canyon, like other "natural" sites, has been intentionally changed by technology: electrical generation plants, dams, airplanes, boats, automobiles, and much more. Across Stegner's sky "without a smudge" smog blows in from the enormous coal-burning Four Corners Power Plant to the east and from Los Angeles to the west. The air is often so hazy that the other rim is hard to see. Because of the Glen Canyon Dam upstream, the water in the Colorado is a

⁵⁴Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1969.

controlled flow. It is no longer warm and red, but cold and green. With sediment impounded upstream, sand banks are not replenished. Because the gorge is no longer scoured out by the high water of the spring, the debris swept down by flash floods from side canyons is never washed away. The tame river's ecological system has changed dramatically, and it is monitored and managed. As the title of Philip Fradkin's classic work put it, the Colorado is *A River No More*.⁵⁵ Government agencies control it from one end to the other. The experience of the Grand Canyon is not only conventionalized and over-determined; it begins to resemble the visit to a theme park, regulated by bureaucrats concerned with game management, waste disposal, the logistics of transportation, crowd control, environmental protection, medical emergencies, electrical generation, preservation of biological diversity, the water supply, and air quality control.

Within this framework of regulation, the Canyon is offered to the consumer as an aerial view, as a series of a landscape tableaux, as an educational lecture at an evening camp fire, as a natural history lesson, as a series of books for sale at the gift shops near the rim, as film cassettes, as an IMAX film and even as the Las Vegas amusement park ride, "Grand Slam Canyon". With the Canyon already located on its own home page, the virtual canyon cannot be far behind, allowing us to wonder not at the site, but at its replication. Fellow tourists can be eliminated along with smog, airplanes and helicopters, poor weather, rattlesnakes, sunstroke, and the inconvenience of night. The virtual canyon will be perfect, and perpetually available. No doubt it will be advertized as being better than the real thing.

Leaving the real canyon behind would mean leaving our bodies behind as well, abandoning the kinetic knowing of the object and the synesthesia of its aromas, textures, sounds, and vistas. Virtual reality may mean the death of the tourist in the nineteenth century sense of the term. This is another way of saying that for the

⁵⁵Fradkin, *op. cit.*

post-modern tourist landscape itself may be disappearing.⁵⁶ The post-modern Grand Canyon is fast becoming a collage of representations in different media. Tourist expectations increasingly seem to emerge from the experience of film and television, as suggested by a recent "Far Side" cartoon, in which a couple stands at a "Canyon lookout." The husband says: "I dunno. We're just so far up, I think this'd be better on the tube."⁵⁷ In fact, Sony used precisely this idea in a 1992 television commercial, which showed a large television set perched near the rim. A small boy ran to it, "more interested in watching the canyon's image on TV than taking in the actual landscape." In the same year, General Electric used the Grand Canyon in an advertisement for the vibrant colors of its commercial lighting system. Many other advertisers are regularly denied permission to use the park, which has rejected proposals to show people throwing wallets, hitting golf balls, and driving cars into the Canyon. Some of those rebuffed by the Park make footage at nearby Indian Reservations.⁵⁸

III

Contemporary tourists gaze down at what they expect to be absolute nature, only to find that the Grand Canyon is a social-construction, starting with the moment when its features were named, described, sketched, and photographed by explorers and artists, and continuing to our own day when it is inflected by all the mechanisms of mass tourism. The physical space itself is controlled by the National Park Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and hydraulic engineers. The electricity generated is sold to private companies, and the water is allocated and transported to powerful interests in Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles. The tourists have come to see Nature writ large and instead find themselves within another, familiar but unwelcome narrative, of technologies being used to depict, to modify, to manage and finally to replace nature.

⁵⁶ At least this is true if one accepts J. B. Jackson's definition of landscape as "a concrete, three dimensional, shared reality." J. B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, pp. 3-8.

⁵⁷ Gary Larson, "The Far Side," *International Herald Tribune*, Oct. 19, 1995.

⁵⁸ Fara Warner, "The Place to Be This Year," *Brandweek*, vo. 33, n. 45. 1992.

The Canyon has been increasingly de-realized, beginning with the very nineteenth-century paintings and photographs that made it a popular icon. The tourist has been offered ever more powerful technologies of space-time compression to assimilate the site: railroads, cars, airplanes, snowmobiles, film, the IMAX theater, the internet, and, coming soon, the Virtual Canyon. The site that once symbolized America as nature is fast becoming a simulation, a post-landscape that apparently promises no therapeutic renewal. The avant-guard tourist seems fated to become an interactive browser in cyberspace, a wanderer in virtual reality, seeking there that perfection and variety once pursued in packaged tours of the three-dimensional world.

Yet there is something missing from this argument, which carries with it a sense of inevitability. Are human beings caught within a cultural juggernaut that controls their perceptions of landscape so completely that the sublime experience of nature will prove to have been a temporary episode, lasting but a few centuries? Were the theories of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke just creations of a particular historical moment, ephemeral objectifications of a growing middle-class affection for mountains and uncultivated landscapes? Or should the edifice of tourism that recycles images of the Grand Canyon be seen as an obstacle to comprehending the site? The nineteenth century already witnessed the growth of the egotistical sublime, in which an individual's exaggerated expectations of magnificence outran the actual experience of a site. Clarence Dutton, one of the early geologists who studied the Canyon, as early as 1882 noted that many a visitor came, "with a picture of it created by his own imagination. He reaches the spot, the conjured picture vanishes in an instant, and the place of it must be filled anew."⁵⁹ The annihilation of preconceptions takes more time than most tourists expect to spend, not more time than the Canyon is available.

Despite the recirculation of tourist images and the IMAX theater's best efforts to replace the site with simulacra, the three-

⁵⁹Clarence E. Dutton, *Tertiary History of the Grand Cañon District*. Government Printing Office, 1882; reprint Peregrine Smith, 1977, p.142.

dimensional Canyon persists. There are days when few tourists visit. I was fortunate enough to be there at such a time, in the second week of December, 1993. I arrived in the late afternoon, as the shadows began to swallow up the Canyon, but had time for several magnificent views from the lookouts. There were virtually no other cars in the parking lots before I checked in at El Tovar, the same hotel that Fred Harvey had built when the Sante Fe line reached the South Rim. A light snow fell during the night. The next morning I walked along the rim for about a mile, without seeing or hearing another person, making the first footprints in the new-fallen snow. The dusting of white along the rim made a brilliant contrast to the red sandstone below. The rising mists were splintered rainbows. For about an hour, at the center of Grand Canyon tourism, I was alone, free to experience the space undisturbed.⁶⁰ By the same token, as experienced hikers attest, even in the heavy tourist season there are many places in the 270 mile long Canyon where virtually no one ever penetrates, and where the signs of humanity are few and far between.

The problems with the notion that the Grand Canyon is being de-realized are suggested by Mark Tansey's 1990 canvas, "Constructing the Grand Canyon."⁶¹ At first glance it appears to depict a large excavation site, where men and women are hard at work removing sedimentary rock from the nearly precipitous walls of a red canyon. Closer inspection reveals, however, that these are not rocks but fragments of texts. In a few places individual words are legible, but no sentences or even meaningful phrases can be read. By replacing erosion with (de)construction, the image pretends to answer the often repeated questions by naive visitors to

⁶⁰ It also gave me satisfaction to think that the Canyon will endure even if tourists cease to be interested in it, and that it will still be there for eons after the dams have crumbled into dust. Thus the Canyon can function in our aesthetic economy (1) as the paradigmatic example of the sublime, (2) as the industrial and commercial degradation of nature, and (3) as a representation of the ultimate unimportance of human actions. The third response negates the need to feel moral indignation, and allows the viewer to return to the initial sublime response.

⁶¹ The painting, which belongs to the Walker Art Museum, is reproduced in Arthur Danto, *Mark Tansey*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992, pp. 122-123.

the actual Grand Canyon: "How was it built? What tools did they use?" A railroad line is being constructed down the center of the site, where skips can be loaded with fragments to be carted away. Since these are not rocks but disintegrated texts, it is not surprising to find that at least six of the figures in the composition are theorists associated with post-structuralism.⁶² On the left side, gazing down at the scene is Michel Foucault, while a group in the middle of the image turn out to be "The Yale School," busy deploying their surveying apparatus. In contrast to this busy group, Paul De Man, Jacques Derrida, Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman all appear to be observers but not directors of the activities around them. Tansey not only has depicted deconstruction as construction, but he has committed the sin of realistic portraiture, albeit in an impossible landscape. For the sedimentary rocks are now composed of words, the raging Colorado River has been replaced by a pathetically small railroad, and there is no animal or plant life in this wasteland. The project focuses on muscle power, which would be completely inadequate to create anything on the scale of the real Grand Canyon. The declivity made by the deconstructionists, if it were real, could be set down anywhere on the actual site and disappear completely unnoticed, a tiny side-show canyon, without interest, a literal footnote.

Tansey playfully suggests that this valley of deconstruction is an arbitrary critical idea. In his inversion, men construct a canyon while nature stands outside, above even Foucault's gaze, and observes. Consider the buffalo who gaze down at these human beings in their self-created abyss. Buffalo were nearly extinct by the early twentieth century. They were almost literally absent, but they have come back, just as meaning comes back once one escapes the enclosed world of deconstruction. The buffalo are the tourists at this site, reminding us of another world that lies beyond the rim. The deconstructionist project can dig deeper into the sediments of culture. Critics can build a sophisticated apparatus, as complex as a railroad, to carry away the smashed results of their work. But their railroad will have no place to go, for there is no exit from their

⁶²All identifications were made by Tansey himself, Danto, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

man-made canyon. Rather than suggest the limits of Nature, this canvas ultimately suggests the limits of contemporary aesthetics, and of the need, as Aldo Leopold put it, to try to think like a mountain, or a buffalo.

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