

“Photographs express innocence; they express the defenselessness of lives moving toward their own destruction. It is precisely this link between photography and death that is visible in all people within photography.”

— Susan Sontag

The Role of the Photographer in Topographic Photography

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Abstract

In this research, I examine the role and mindset of photographers in topographic photography. Topographic photography has accompanied photographers since the invention of photography. Within this genre, however, there has been a consistent effort to minimize the role of the photographer, placing primary emphasis on the location itself. The photographer is often depicted as a detached observer who simply transmits emotionless images from behind the camera.

This perception prompted me to investigate the true role of photographers in topographic photography. By analyzing significant topographic photographs from the invention of photography onward, as well as studying photographers' statements, quotations, and working methods, I explore the importance and influence of the topographic photographer. My aim is to understand the real impact of the photographer and the underlying thought processes that operate behind the camera.

Topographic photography is a documentary method for recording the human living environment and presenting it to future generations. It is one of the most valuable visual resources for researching humanity, as it allows us to study human life and environments across time with precision. Today, this approach has gained significant attention among young photographers and gallery curators.

Photography is a means of recording human presence and "being-there." From the very beginning, topographic approaches have been among the methods used by photographers. The first recorded images show that humans have always sought to understand themselves and their environment.

Notably, photographers working in this genre often strive to remain unseen and neutral. In this approach, the photographer is frequently described as impartial, direct, cold, and emotionless—simply transferring information and showing environments as they appear.

This research questions that assumption: What is the true role of the photographer in topographic photography? Can photographers genuinely remain neutral and non-influential while choosing and recording a subject? How do photographers, through their perspective, assign meaning to space and transform it into "place"? This study is descriptive and analytical, relying on library research and historical photographic examples.

A landscape can be understood as a portion of land viewed from a distance (Majid Akhgar, 1391/2012). However, the human observer always influences how a landscape is perceived, as cultural and social backgrounds shape vision. Even when attempting to capture a "pure landscape," devoid of visible human influence, the photograph is still

shaped by the photographer's decisions. The photographer decides what to include and what to omit.

Two main approaches exist in landscape photography. The first treats the photographer as an observer, standing at a distance from nature and recording it. In this approach, the landscape is analyzed not only for its physical features but also in connection with the people who inhabit it. A landscape cannot be fully separated from its inhabitants, and therefore, from culture and society. As David Bate explains, landscape is a space shaped into a symbolic form, reflecting ideas about culture, identity, and civilization under the guise of nature.

The second approach positions the photographer within the landscape. Here, photography functions as a form of "habitat." The photographer captures an environment they fully understand because they are part of it. In this case, the photographer represents the landscape from inside it, rather than observing it externally.

Topographic Photographers in the History of Photography

Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, the French inventor often known more for inventing photography than for practicing it, was a pioneer in the field. He captured the first recorded photograph by exposing the view from the upper window of his workplace for about eight hours, resulting in a blurred image of the buildings in front and the landscape behind. This image is an early example of topographic photography because it documented a human environment for the first time. Niépce focused on the ordinary surroundings that are often overlooked, highlighting that even the most everyday landscapes can become subjects of significant documentation.

In 1838, Louis Daguerre captured the first photograph ever to include human beings, on the Boulevard du Temple in Paris. The primary subject was the boulevard itself, but two people appeared because they remained still for more than ten minutes. The long exposure time required by cameras at the time caused all other moving figures and carriages to disappear from the photograph. This image highlights how focusing on place can unexpectedly record human presence.

Eugène Atget, known as the father of documentary photography, created a vast collection documenting Parisian streets and neighborhoods during a time of rapid change. He photographed streets, shop windows, balconies, building facades, and other urban details. His photographs were primarily created for painters and sold at low prices, often with simple print quality. Atget's aim was to record visual appearances and urban changes rather than convey symbolic or artistic messages. This approach reinforced the idea of photography as a document, giving viewers a neutral, realistic

representation of reality without entering imaginative or artistic realms. His work contributed significantly to place-based photography by showing the importance of documenting changes in the urban environment.

Brassaï explored the hidden sides of Paris, photographing bars, cafés, quiet streets, and night wanderers. He preferred direct, conscious engagement with his subjects rather than using hidden or deceptive techniques. Brassaï aimed to capture people's faces while they were immersed in their thoughts, maintaining a neutral perspective to convey inner truths. His work, including portraits of Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí, influenced a more neutral, emotionless approach to portrait photography. Brassaï's methodology emphasized that photographs are not only final images but also stages in the photographer's creative process. Photography, when used this way, becomes a tool for recording reality with precision rather than just visual memory.

Roger Fenton is widely recognized as one of the first war photographers, particularly for his documentation of the Crimean War. However, his work often aligns more closely with place-based photography. Due to heavy equipment and long exposure times, Fenton could not capture immediate action or violence. He focused instead on the environment where the war took place. In *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, Fenton depicts a valley filled with cannonballs, capturing the impact of war without showing direct violence. His careful composition, influenced by his background in painting, emphasizes the topographic nature of the scene, reflecting both the landscape and its narrative significance.

Francis Frith observed that, despite increasing knowledge of the world, much of it remained unknown to people engaged in daily life. He understood that illustration could not compete with photography in capturing realism and immediacy. Frith developed his work around the idea that photography preserves a part of the world and conveys the experience of being in a place. Through his photographs, viewers can sense the presence of a location and feel as though they share the photographer's experience. Susan Sontag later discussed a similar concept in *On Photography*, suggesting that repeated exposure to images can make real landscapes feel familiar, highlighting the profound effect of photography on human perception.

Paul Strand approached places not for their function but as compositions of visual forms. He presented subjects as collections of objects with defined boundaries, demonstrating that photographs can be both documentation and artistic interpretation. Strand's perspective emphasizes the photographer's role, showing that lived experience and artistic vision shape how space and objects are represented.

Ansel Adams, the father of American nature photography, balanced composition, timing, and personal experience in his work. He sought to convey the awe of being in a particular place, not merely to document it. Through careful timing, poetic sensitivity, and his unique worldview, Adams created images of enduring influence. He believed photography could be an independent art form, focusing on a “direct and honest representation of nature” without imitating other arts or manipulating the scene. Adams pursued “pure truth,” recording what he saw and felt deeply. He also emphasized foresight in photography, encouraging anticipation and engagement before taking a photograph. For Adams, the spirit of the place, conveyed through the photographer’s vision, is more important than the camera itself.

Lewis Baltz’s photographs often evoke alienation and suspense, leaving questions unanswered. He aimed to capture the hidden identity of locations, showing the impact of human intervention on once-pristine landscapes. Baltz maintained an objective, detached view, avoiding aesthetic embellishment. His cold, neutral approach reflects a deliberate choice to present environments without sentimentality or romanticism. In the 1970s, Stephen Shore used place-based photography to document American consumer society. He employed a visual language accessible even to non-professionals. Shore critiqued consumerism through subtle composition, color, and the act of observation. His philosophy was that photography should record the world without manipulation, allowing the photographer to convey meaning solely through choice, framing, and perspective.

Nicholas Nixon took a high-vantage approach, observing cities as miniature models. His perspective asserts control over the subject and guides the viewer’s perception. Nixon demonstrates that the photographer’s vision shapes the identity of spaces, communicating how they should be understood—whether as large cities, small-scale models, or spaces for human activity or conflict.

Founded in the 1950s by Bernd and Hilla Becher, the Düsseldorf School of Photography documented industrial structures and forgotten human-made objects worldwide. Using consistent lighting, fixed compositions, and serial photography, the Bechers formalized a cold, impersonal style that extended the legacy of place-based photography. Their work emphasized form, minimalism, and conceptual thinking. By calling their photographs “sculptures,” they elevated industrial structures to artistic subjects. The Bechers argued that photography is an independent medium, not intended to provoke emotion, beauty, or aesthetic pleasure, but to record space and provide topographical documentation.

Conclusion

Photography is a journey shaped by the photographer's accumulated knowledge, experience, and decisions over time. Place-based photographers, as Sayyad Nabavi notes, are "observers who represent the struggle over ownership between nature and humans." These observers play a central role in shaping images. It is the photographer's lived experience, choices, and training that guide the selection of subjects, making the photographer indispensable in creating meaningful topographic photographs.

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