

THE LANGUAGE OF EXPLOSION: DOCUMENTING NUCLEAR CRATERS IN THE AMERICAN WEST

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Art world documentarians, anonymous government cataloguers, and nuclear tourists continue to make the pilgrimage to the Department of Energy's Nevada testing grounds, in order to make photographic record of the Sedan Crater, as if, somehow, prior accounts do not suffice. The presumption may be that the next photo will somehow get it right—that is, embody the nuclear explosion and our relationship to it. All feature a cavernous hole in semi-darkness; shadows fall from the high walls created when an atomic bomb exploded at its center. Tall sloping desert mountains, worn-down remnants of pre-historic geological activity, rise in the background. On its website, the Department of Energy (DOE) offers to send to any United States citizen, without charge, three 8 x 10 color glossy prints of an image of the crater.¹ I take them up on their offer.

In Peter Goin's photo of the Sedan Crater—more document than souvenir—the crater functions as a sun-dial: the bright, taut light precisely indicates the time of day. Goin's photo registers that it is towards the end of the afternoon in the desert. The soil is light brown and the sky appears nearly bleached. The focus is sharp and the print is detailed. The whole of the crater is not visible. The viewer must extrapolate that the visible crescent will complete itself

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in circular form. Loose soil has collected on the bottom of the crater, but the striated walls have not given way to the erosive qualities of wind and human activity. Whether one accesses the crater by photo or by an actual trek to its rim, the desire to enter the Sedan crater is pervasive. Tourists arrive by bus but cannot touch the inside. They stand idle at the platform that overlooks the crater. Later, some cautious visitors throw the shoes they wore to the crater's edge into the trash; the soles are coated with irradiated soil.²

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard is convinced of the lyric and psychological possibilities of a symbiotic relationship between interior and exterior landscapes, and he capitalizes upon that which most have secretly hoped for: the existence of internal geographies. The challenge for the reader lies within the process of authentication, emotionally and philosophically confirming the existence of this private space that feels like topography. Imagining worlds above and below us is a fairly standard psychological procedure within Western faiths, but our ability to find these worlds within ourselves hinges on an ability to conjure and confirm at the same time.

Metaphors that use landscape to represent an interior self come satisfyingly close to materializing that which we desire but cannot prove: that wooded groves, isolated pools, and lush glades reside deep within us. We make metaphors out of exterior spaces, exterior spaces that—with literary license—begin to contain the corrupted logic of our dreaming selves (corrupted because this cannot be physiologically or geologically true and dreaming because our subconscious wills these psychic conceptions into being).

A common tendency is to picture these invented interior places as beautiful landscapes, but what if those landscapes are neither scenic nor intact? Why wouldn't these barren and fragmented places be made local; that is internalized, as well? And if one concedes that these decimated places psychologically describe the interior psyche of some, are they, in fact, locatable? Can they be visited? Controlled? Are they eventually made subject to the voyeuristic eye of those who fetishize the despondent person and the destroyed place, those day tourists who pleasurably circumambulate the rims of the craters that pit others?

Let me offer a fledgling description of how the destruction of certain landscapes can be twin to the process that creates and haunts the traumatized psyche: When a person is psychologically harmed, the memory of that harming event irregularly floods the body; paralleling the arrhythmic flooding created by the re-engineering of river systems by levee or canal. One could also compare this emo-

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NF-12187—Sedan Crater was formed when a 104KT explosive buried under 635 feet of desert alluvium was fired at the Nevada Test Site on July 6, 1962, displacing 12 million tons of earth. The crater is 320 feet deep and 1,280 feet in diameter. Reprinted by permission of the US Department of Energy.

tional process to the erosive processes instigated by mining or bombing—how traumatic memories are unearthed, shifted, subsumed. The recessions and returns of memory, whether one associates them with the vicissitudes of water levels or the subduction zones exacerbated by geological erosion, are often uneven. This is because the act of remembering a violation echoes the act of tracing the perimeters of a semi-open wound, a half-eroded crater; former boundaries/edges dissolve in places and reappear/deposit themselves in other locations. Previous emotional landmarks remain but are often unrecognizable, sometimes flooded or swallowed. Though we are sometimes urged, within literary and cinematic contexts, to envision internal topographies that subscribe to general notions of beauty, we should also oppositionally imagine the interior as an eerie, hushed, wide-open wasteland of sorts: toxic and uncharterable. No animal heart beats within the hazy tree line.

Bachelard sidesteps the crater and extols the path to inner immensity via desert travails and forest ambles, as “this love duet between dreamer and the world, making man and the world into two wedded

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creatures that are paradoxically united in the dialogue of their solitude.” His premise is a luxury of sorts: the supposition that all possess a psychic terrain that hedges towards the leeward side of beauty and that this terrain only generates from something that resembles loving. For all those teaming veldts and wet and lovely tropics contained within the skins of the happy—the aggrieved are near bursting with decimated places, their interior geography irreversibly altered by human trespass. I am speaking of places—both flesh and ephemeral—where nothing is left, where catastrophic events have displaced both literal place and emotional person. The removed materials create and sustain a new psychological cartography.

When a nuclear explosion occurs at a shallow depth underground, the fire breaks through the surface of the earth within a fraction of a second of the detonation. The gases, intensely hot at high pressure, are released and they carry up with them large quantities of soil, rock, and debris in the form of a hollow column. For a burst at a shallow depth, the column tends to assume the shape of an inverted cone, which fans out as it rises to produce a radical throw-out.³

Impact. Release. Burst. Throw out. Perhaps this language made from explosion—physical and mental—can produce a system of signs that allows us to chart the trajectory of psychological upheavals (contrary to my earlier assertion that these traumatic places are altogether unnavigable); by using the language of explosion what becomes observable is not so much the physical form of trauma (the bomb crater, the senseless victim) as the course of its motion (the zenith of the explosion, the depth of the victim’s break-down).

The manner in which a traumatic event temporarily displaces any interior sense of personhood becomes similar to the actualization and effects of a nuclear blast. Fragments (of self) rain down and settle into a crater and its surrounding environs. Yet the end result of an explosion doesn’t end with the settling of shattered matter; within the stillness, there is a bee-like dance of radioactive particles. When everything that preceded it is destroyed, the language of explosion remains. Its grammar is distinctive: exceptions for raw deletion, a declension just for loss, another for recovery and a subjunctive form of a verb that expresses the doubt or the desire around making the remains (of violation) a visual pleasure.⁴

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Emmet Gowin also photographed the Sedan Crater and its surrounding environs. The resulting black-and-white aerial shots are luminous; vast distances appear silver in the light; from a distance these craters seem to be temporarily more akin to visual texture than geologic rupture. When pleasure is acquired this way—by the way in which light and shutter trace geological devastation—has annihilation been elevated to art form and parlor trick? Are we claiming loveliness in order to exorcise horror? Do we invert the gravity of the situation because we cannot endure its impact or bare its similarity to previous disasters? But Gowin's shot of the Sedan Crater is not simply alluring, it reveals the magnitude of the bomb's detonation; the blackness of the pit communicates the depth of the destruction and the absence of anything else in absolute terms: the shadows are stark; the sunlight does not penetrate the crater; nothing grows.

Gowin's visual salvage of the Nevada test site is neither artistic arrogance nor a ghoulish impulse made grand in scale; it is behaviorally in accord with the way in which those who observe the extreme eradications of place (or person) react. These witnesses may, as Gowin does, decide that "even when the landscape is greatly disfigured or brutalized, it is always deeply animated from within."⁵ Both general witness and singular artist extract and disseminate the anima—that is, the livid element that survives the disfigurement of person or place. The witnesses cannot morally endure their roles without attempts to emotionally transform destruction into something closer to rapture.⁶ I previously mentioned a language of explosion and I am curious as to whether the temporary usage of yet another language shows itself here. The language of explosion (breaking and flying and falling) is translated into a language of rapture (suspension and crystallization). In attempts to make sense of atomic destruction, the witness must swap the mechanics of explosion for the dream life of rapture.

We could also call this speaking in visual tongues; for to speak in tongues is to perform untranslatable things, to communicate without a one-to-one conversion. By resorting to an aesthetic vocabulary that defies complete interpretation, the witness can both enter into and escape the traumatized landscape. Gowin has flown across the multiple abysses of the DOE site, without physical entrance or exit. But a trespass and a dialogue still occur. Something divorced from a physical visitation takes place and because the language of rapture is temporarily employed, its photographic transcription remains.

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An essential element of this fetishization of deleted spaces is a compulsive and consecutive return to the eradicated space itself—be it an internal or external touchstone grazed and gazed again and again, be it an actual pilgrimage, an oral testimony or a photograph. This compulsion to return to the space is executed by both the detached witness and the violated. The violated momentarily displace their violation by witnessing other sites of destruction—by lingering within exterior landscapes of trauma, by collecting images of catastrophe in souvenir form, by examining the violations of other humans.

Survivors oft become possessed by the landscape that best describes their personal territories of grief. I'm drawn to Yucca Flat—a desert pocked with nuclear bomb craters—because there is something both familiar to me and shocking about destruction that is so deliberate; the scale is overwhelming; the radioactivity invisibly maligns. We, myself and others, recognize ruined landscapes as if they were snapshots of ourselves; we have amended Bachelard's assertion that an interior geography exists to include our psychosis and our sentiment and we attach it to photographs in this world. By developing and applying a 'language of explosion' to these images and to our ecological and psychological catastrophes, an analysis that neither embraces destruction nor beauty, but negotiates its fault line may be generated.

In closing, we could return to Bachelard's honey-tongued descriptions of the interior, but these descriptions do not apply to the emotionally ruined and certainly do not begin to entertain the negotiations of beauty and destruction suggested above. And in our attempts to generate an analysis around these fault lines, our presumptions would have us continually eking out the remnants of the explosion, but what of the implosion? By taking leave of Bachelard and beginning to examine the inversion of the explosion, in the form of the anatomical (embulism), or geological (subterranean collapse), we extend this discourse's vocabulary, perhaps exhaustively. In *Either/Or*, Soren Kierkegaard describes an interior geography where the crater is more marine than arid. He employs a manner of description that could be likened to 'the language of explosion' when he explains this lagoon's vexed relation to interior conscience:

[Thought] labored in vain; egged on by me; it was continually going beyond itself and continually collapsing back into itself. It was continually looking for a foothold and finding none. It was continually trying

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to find bottom, but could not swim nor wade. (1843, 58)

Here the thinking self is located, submerged, dunked even, within its own interior landscape, and it breaks apart. The exploded (and subsequently welded together) self both contains and dwells within an inner topography that is fraught with interior and exterior ruptures, craters even. Flooded or arid. In such a place, lyric language can hardly suffice when attempting to reconcile the self with its internal ruptures. It, whether language or body, rarely holds together long enough for the cobbling together of a self both ruined and lovely.

Notes

1. Returning to this essay, a year and a half after its initial writing, certain elements seemed closed to me while others appeared endlessly open. This reference to the commodification of nuclear spaces is one of these generative places. How does catastrophe become souvenir? How does this closed and minimal form, common to souvenirs, begin to encompass the untenable largesse of disaster? What happens when this kind of souvenir—which is serving as both trinket and “scalp”—fails to minimize the horror of nuclear landscape?

I also would like to do some thinking around the fact that the souvenir is oft produced for national monuments (Statue of Liberty, Grand Canyon National Park, Alcatraz) that belong to the public. The land these places are located in belongs to the government, and transitively to all of its citizens (our liberty, our grandeur, and our imprisonment). By purchasing the charm bracelet, pencil sharpener, t-shirt, are we in fact laying claim to our ownership of these places? How does a citizen claim ownership of nationally-owned nuclear landscapes? Is the American public willing to solidify their connection to these spaces via purchase? Superficially, it appears that the answer is no. The government offers souvenir photos of nuclear test sites for free: a philanthropic gesture or an oblique way of forcing paternity?

2. Every kind of person, spanning from American president to snowboarder (see below) seeks entry; yet it is seemingly counter-intuitive; to hover over the epicenter of the explosion, and plumb the epicenter of radioactivity. These adventurers, voyeurs, witnesses—call them what you will—find pleasure in physically, visually, or emotionally entering a gutted landscape (i.e. the crater). The danger of exposure is either minimized (through protective suits,

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through the extraordinary distances between the hovering plane and the radioactive pit, or simply by verbally dismissing the claims of anti-nuclear activists) or the danger of exposure is fetishized; the harm that could be done is sublimated (by the voyeur), overridden by their desire to prove that they can withstand the harm. When I wrote the initial draft of this paper, I was, in a sense, writing from the center of the crater. I had not entered for pleasure, but had fallen in. I was writing about a traumatized landscape while I struggled with my own psychological traumas: the ways I couldn't talk about the parts of me that had been emptied out, or the ways in which the parts of me that remained was unfamiliar. I was subject to the explosion, but was rather deaf to the fact that its language surrounded me and described me. It was only after I realized this that I began to look at this essay again. I began writing from the bottom of the crater, but was revising from the rim.

For an account of the government's continued development of the DOE Nevada Test Site and brief mentions of various plans to include various presidents see the site listed below. "[He] recalls that the president looked at the crater beneath him, while his plane flew over." <http://www.teidnt3.lbl.gov/seaborg/NatService.html>

Two crews of Apollo astronauts have trained for lunar missions at the Sedan Crater as well.

The aforementioned desire to enter the crater can also be interpreted as an extension of the American obsession with leisure:

"A snowboarder is not granted permission to surf this gorge despite his claim to wear a protective suit and respirator in a recent interview with Groom Lake Interceptor Agent X, regarding his travels around the Nevada Test Site. It was brought to my attention that he had requested the permission of the DOE (Department of Energy) to snowboard down the inside wall of the Sedan Crater, while wearing a Hazmat (Hazardous Materials) suit and Respirator. This stunt was to be video taped and released to the public in a short movie version. As of this writing no confirmation has been received indicating the outcome of Agent X's negotiations with the DOE. On September 5, 1995 we were informed that Snowboarder Magazine may run a short blurb on X's "Sedansurfing"."

3. <http://www.eathlinks.com>

4. This multivocal subjunctive form of cratering could be used to express the disbelief that beauty could ever exist within the irrevocably destroyed or to express the possibility of forging a beauty amongst ruins.

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5. Because I live in a country that is fixated on testimony (from the simulated testament to product in television commercials to the day-time talk-show narratives of the wrongful and wronged, to the more distant political trials for apocalyptic war crimes to the academic desire to make a person or place into a text about memory and trauma and witness) the very word *witness* is fraught; its purpose or use is suspect. Is Gowin truly *witness* if the event—the explosion itself—has long subsided? Is the viewer of Gowin's photographs *witness* if the event is thrice mediated—through the lens of the camera, through the body of Emmet Gowin, through the convolutions of time? Can the landscape be witness to its own destruction? Each type of witness (photographer, spectator, victim) has its own specific and complicated relationship.

6. There are some obvious dangers in this supposedly ethical imperative to make the catastrophic sublime; it's reductive, it presumes understanding, it attempts to colonize/control destroyed places and people, and the impulse to gawk becomes hardwired, accident as entertainment.

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