Spaces in Crisis: Photography of Abandonment, Desolation and Emptiness in the U.S.A.

Zoltán Dragon

Abstract: The essay explores the spatial myth of America as constructed through photography, focusing on the American West. It argues that photography has historically shaped the American myth by visualizing the frontier as a contact zone between wilderness and civilization. Using a theoretical framework grounded topological analysis, the essay juxtaposes 19th-century images of progress and expansion with contemporary photographs of desolation and abandonment, revealing a haunting return of the past through spatial configurations that challenge and perpetuate the myth differently. The essay traces the development of Western photography from Civil War-era documentation to the King Survey's images that combined technological progress and wilderness, revealing how photography's evidentiary power was intertwined with expansionist imperialism. It then examines the contemporary photographic representation of empty, decaying American spaces as a form of double exposure, where past progress and present abandonment co-exist and entangle topologically as one. This new perspective incorporates psychoanalytic concepts of *extimacy* and spatial theories such as Soja's Thirdspace to argue for a breakdown of the binary myth of the frontier and a reconfiguration of photographic spaces as sites of lived experience and haunting. Ultimately, the analysis puts forward the notion of a photographic "ontopology," where images are not mere temporal records but spatial analogies that sustain the myth of the West through an ongoing visual dialogue.

Keywords: ontopology, hauntology, King Survey, thirdspace, American West, frontier, photography

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The myth of America is fundamentally spatial. From the idea of the virgin land to the imaginary contact zone for wilderness and civilization marked by the frontier, this imaginary space constitutes a mythic topography on which historical progression unfolds. These images had been narrative constructions until the invention of photography, when they were given a new mode of visibility and materiality. These topoi have been extensively photographed in the U.S.: the Civil War was the first overly mediatized war, followed by an extensive documentation of images of immigrants deboarding ships, or skyscrapers soaring into unimaginable heights - all visual evidence of progress, plowing their way forward in populating the landscape of the often-unfriendly wilderness.

There is a striking similarity between these images and contemporary photographs depicting empty highways, desolate gas stations, ghost towns or depopulated rust belt areas. While visually akin, the contemporary group of images certainly have an opposite trajectory: they testify of the American wilderness return, taxing the yield of twentieth-century growth and progress. In other words, while 19th century photographs present natural landscapes with tiny little signs of civilization, contemporary photos interrogate the expanse and success of progress. As Jean Baudrillard notes in his book on America, these mutually exclusive spatial configurations coexist today:

> Extraordinary sites, capitals of fiction become reality. Sublime, transpolitical sites of extraterritoriality, combining as they do the earth's undamaged geological grandeur with a sophisticated, nuclear, orbital, computer technology. (Baudrillard 1989, 5)

He then goes on to explain his urge to search for "astral America," "the America of the empty, absolute freedom of the freeways," "the finished form of the future catastrophe of the social in geology" (ibid.). Clearly, he is after the myth of the American West, conjured as an image.

Photography, according to the most classical and dominant critical trend advocated by Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, has been intricately connected to Death and to a specific temporal way of operation. The present of the image brings us back to the past that had already foreshadowed a future - this impossible loop provides the framework for a critical understanding of photography. While this temporality is certainly important, it does not address the issue at hand regarding the American West and its pictorial dimension.

I want to double-expose the past and the present through their photographic similarities, based on the thematic and sometimes compositional analogies that will bring me from a temporal axis of photography to understanding it as an ultimately spatial analogy. By analogy, I refer to Kaja Silverman's definition that goes beyond the post-structuralist and semiotics-based indexical referentiality of image to reality, or even its iconicity. Analogy is more than mere resemblance, "symbolic equivalence, logical adequation, or even a rhetorical relationship - like a metaphor or a simile - in which one term functions as a provisional placeholder for another" (Silverman 2015, 11). According to Silverman, analogy is about the "authorless and untranscendable similarities that structure … 'the world', and that give everything the same ontological weight" (ibid.). It is through analogizing the world around us that we come to be, become subjects, in the fullness of our cognitive presence: these are the analogies "through which we see and are seen," as Silverman explains (ibid.).

My attempt at this double-exposure (or even multiple exposure in many cases) of different times resonates with Silverman's claim that photography is not just a direct imprint of the past but an ongoing relational field that connects different times, subjects, and images. For me this conceptualization provides the basis for the critical double-exposure that sheds light on the inevitable topological horizon of discussing the myth of the American West and the frontier together with the current trend in photographing desolate spaces and places. My aim is to outline a critical-theoretical framework in which the topological dimension of photographic images of American spaces can be tackled beyond the discourse based in the temporal. In other words, I wish to propose a topographical analysis of time fossilized into space via the photographic. With this the objective is to locate the moment of the breakdown of the foundational dichotomy of the myth of the American West in the past and to see how the critical images of the present do not destabilize the very myth but present a way of reiterating it differently.

Past-West

The first photographic images of "the American West after the Civil War generated important ideas for citizens about the identity and future of the United States," as Joanna Lukitsh points out (Hacking 2021, 132). As we move on in time towards the 20th century, the evidentiary nature of the medium becomes a means for social and political transformation in various ways. A practical example of the use and power of photography takes us back to 1840, when Edward Anthony used daguerreotypes in Maine "to assist in settling a boundary dispute with Canada" (Johnson et al. 2016, 198).

Following the Civil War, in which Alexander Gardner, Matthew Brady and Timothy O'Sullivan rose to lead the genre of field photography in the U.S., the need for the documentation of what came to be known as the wild west took shape in an official mission: in 1867, the Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel (the King Survey) started with the objective to explore the geological environment and rivers alongside the new railway lines.

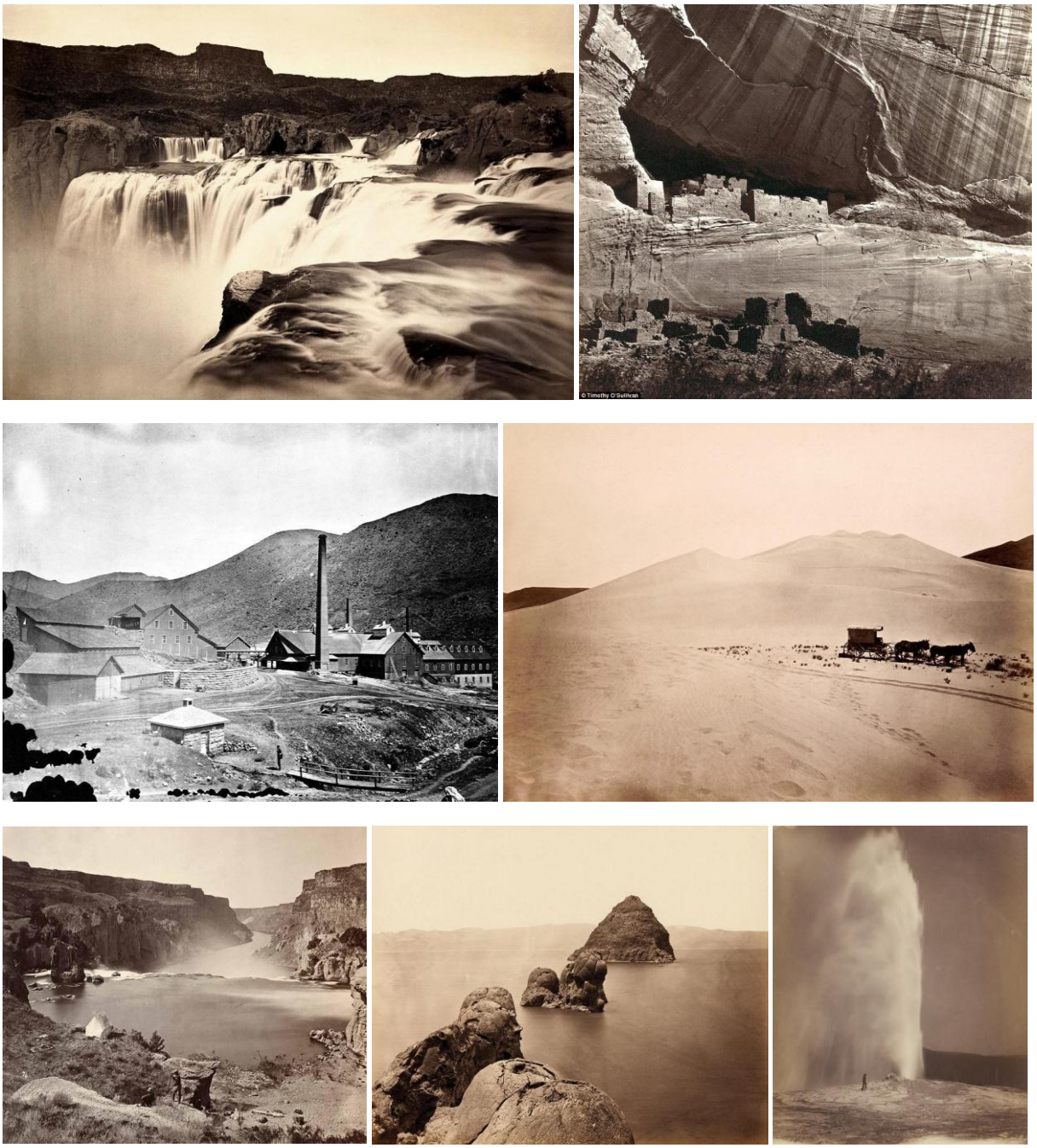

Figure 1. Photographs by 1. Alexander Gardner (*Ruins of Gallego Flour Mills, Richmond*, 1865, panorama, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/267891); 2. Timothy O'Sullivan (*Shoshone Falls, Idaho,* 1868, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.11925); 3. Timothy O'Sullivan (A*ncient Ruins in the Cañon de Chelle, N.M. (No. 11, Geographical Explorations and Surveys West of the 100th Meridian)*, 1873, https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/ancient-ruins-canon-de-chelle-nm-no-11-geographical-explorations-and-surveys-west-100th); 4. Timothy O'Sullivan (*Gould and Curry Mine, Comstock Lode Mine Works, Virginia City*, 1867, https://collections.eastman.org/objects/170838/gould-and-curry-mine-comstock-lode-mine-works-virginia-cit); 5. Timothy O'Sullivan (*Sand Dunes, Carson Desert, Nevada*, 1867, https://www.clevelandart.org/art/2002.45); 6. Timothy O'Sullivan (*Shoshone Falls, Snake River, Idaho*, 1868, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/framing-the-west-at-american-art-museum-120496927/); 7. Timothy O'Sullivan (*The Pyramid and Domes, Pyramid Lake, Nevada*, 1867, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Timothy_O%27Sullivan,_The_Pyramid_and_Domes,_Pyramid_Lake,_Nevada,_1867.jpg); 8. William Henry Jackson (*Old Faithful*, 1870, https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/104CXJ)

As Monica Bravo and Emily Voelker argue, "US western survey photography of the post-Civil War period serves as an instructive case study for epistemological readings of American photographs" (Bravo and Voelker 2020), which resonates with Alan Trachtenberg's seminal book on American photography that provides a thorough analysis of the King Survey, focusing especially on O'Sullivan's work "based on the intertwined politics of naming, viewing, and possessing in processes of imperialist expansion" (ibid). According to Trachtenberg, the very naming of the survey "lays claim to the view. By the same token, a photographic view attaches a possessable image to a place name. A named view is one that has been seen, known, and thereby already possessed (Trachtenberg 1989, 125)." Many of these photographs are now seen to be mythologized as part of "nation-building projects during a period of unification" (Bravo and Voelker 2020).

Photography became the first contact zone for the visualization of the frontier; it was literally on the slash of the dichotomy of civilization vs. wilderness. So much so that in terms of photographic technology, a prime tool for progress, a marker for civilization, one of the most pressing problems could only be solved with the help or transgression of wilderness.

The images of the King Survey were mostly shot on wet collodion plates, which is known to produce amazingly sharp photographs that was needed to further the evidentiary claim for photography, but it had (and still has) a tedious work process: one needs to prepare the glass plates for exposition, carefully shoot the scene with the help of large-format field cameras and then immediately start developing the plates so that the image does not evaporate. To develop the plates a fully equipped movable laboratory was needed with assistants and careful handling.

One of the field photographers, William Henry Jackson, however, overcame the problem of long development time by using the hot spring water he in fact photographed, to halve the necessary time to dry the glass plates, accelerating the tedious process of archiving (Lowe 2017, 103). In other words, frontier photography, which was supposed to document not only the untouched grandeur of the American landscape but the progress of civilization, could only accomplish its mission with the help of the transgression of the object of its images, by inscribing the force of the *about-to-be-tamed* wild. It is but one of the simple technical tricks that helped photographic technology to develop: one, however, that comes from the unexpected interaction with nature.

This seems to be the logic of the *parergon*: that outside contingent that the inside is predicated on, in Jacques Derrida's thinking. As Samuel Weber explains further,

> This is precisely the problem that leads Derrida to the question of the *parergon* in his reading of the *Critique of Judgement*, published in an essay of the same name in *The Truth in Painting*. If, as I have argued, the essential function of *form* in Kant's analysis resides in its power to demarcate the object of aesthetic judgement from its surroundings and thereby to define its internal unity in a manner that does not depend upon its conceptual content or its material substance, then the frame emerges as the enabling limit of the work. What allows the work quite literally *to take place*, that is, to localize itself and thereby to acquire a distinct shape, is something that does not properly 'belong' to the work as an internal component but 'only externally as an adjunct (*Zutat*)', as a *parergon*, an '*hors-d'oeuvre*' (Derrida), which, however, emerges as the essential condition and enabling limit of the *oeuvre* itself. (Weber 1996, 22-23)

In other words, that which is excluded, the outside effect (in this case the force coming from the wilderness of the West) creates the very effect to be looked at as a photograph. In photographic terms, one might ponder how the topography outside of the frame (outside of the composition of the image and therefore: *decomposed*) becomes the central force of the *ergon*, that is "the true matter" of the composition. The *parergon* - the literal meaning of the term in ancient Greek is "beside, or additional to the work" – stands in a dialectic opposition to the ergon, and yet, this

binary opposite is the supplement (in Derridean terms, once again), this spectral, invisible topology that makes the *ergonal* space to appear.

The King Survey images became the epitome of the conquering look, a productive and ontopological event that created the vision of the West on the slash, on the rupture, on the border of the basic operative dichotomy. As Deborah Bright reminds us "whatever its aesthetic merits, every representation of landscape is also a record of human values and actions imposed on the land over time" (Bright 1996, 334), but is this imposition unidirectional in our case?

I think it is precisely at this point that the productive (or destructive) force of this conquering look becomes hauntological when exposed onto the abandoned contemporary spaces that become like a retinal afterimage that contains an encrypted secret, the secret of the transgression of progress, of civilization *per se*, cumulating in illusory palinopsia in which the very materiality of technological advance becomes a regressive signifier of technological mediation, that is photography itself. Hauntology is Derrida's neologism that mixes ontology and haunting into one expression, referring to the ghostly return or insistence of aspects from the past: it captures the effect of haunting in the ontology of the particular object - in our case, photography, especially of the West.

Thus superimposed, the conquering *look* is transformed into a conquering *gaze* as, in Lacanese, the subject of vision becomes its own excess in becoming objectified within the field of vision (Lacan 1998, 106). In other words, the very medium of photography is marked from the very beginning as structurally positioned at the vantage point from which the American West opens up to be seen, precisely because of the haunting excess in its technology provided by the resource in wilderness.

This view also points at how the contemporary traveler faced the West for the very first time: "citizens travelling on the new railroad lines were discovering for themselves the mythic West pictured by photography" (Hacking 2021, 132). This way, photography is *ontopologically* embedded in the creation of the vision of the West, and the West is intrinsically intertwined with the very medium that created it visually. Photography in this respect transcends the simple iconic or indexical relationship between subject and object of the field of vision. It becomes an analogy, "analogizing the world around us," as Silverman explains (2015, 11).

Present/ing the West

Those vast, empty spaces, the overwhelming nature and landscape imagery of the American West interrogate the wilderness: its sublime characteristics that it is foreshadowed to lose with the progress of civilization. I argue that the progress, in the form of technology and the logistics of space and vision extends to the very medium of photography as well, which thus is not that different from railway constructions and engines transgressing the landscape. Photography and photographs, therefore, penetrate the wilderness to create an ordered, civilized vision of the landscape.

This is what I call, using Jacques Derrida's term, photographical *ontopology* (Derrida 1994, 82): the photographic equipment being present in the past of the very environment it aims to visually represent, configure, confine for the future, as if encrypting the specific point of view along with the specific attributes of Being, the world it inhabits at that moment. This is the very root of the photography of the American West - one that now gets extracted, questioning the foundational dichotomy of the western myth by being double exposed onto the present imagery of desolate, abandoned places. This double exposure interrogates the disappearance of the frontier, the imaginary slash between the two ends of the binary, foregrounding the uncanny return of the past through contemporary representations of past progress.

Figure 2. All of these photographs are taken from *A Plain View* (2018) by Jason Lee. In the order of appearance: *Valentine 2*, *Stanford*, *Marathon*, *Marathon 2*, *HWY 90 West of Comstock*, *HWY 90 South of Van Horn*

These photographs from the series *A Plain View* by Jason Lee are the counterparts of Western expansion: it is as if the Other of the conquering gaze returned with the reverse shot of the progress of civilization through the untamed land of the wilderness. Aesthetically speaking, these images use very similar techniques of composition and technologies of production to those shot by O'Sullivan and others. Deep focus is used to render every bit of visual information sharp and discernible throughout the spatial organization of the picture in terms of the layering of

foreground, mid-ground and background elements; images are shot using field cameras in large format, although here we have film stock instead of the wet collodion plates that make it somewhat easier to execute the photographing process. Nonetheless, the very materiality of the photographic ontological event is still preserved. I am tempted here to coin the neologism of *photontology* that captures the foundational power of photography in terms of the vision of the myth.

The photographic landscape created through these contemporary pictures can only be seen in their closely knit relationship with the past images of technological progress and concrete spatiality. This way, they are not emptied out in terms of signification: they are material for meaning-making representations reactivating both subjective and objective connections through the very myth, the root of which is first and foremost representational and topologically configured.

The *punctum* of these contemporary images is, in fact, the *studium* of the past ones, to use Roland Barthes's aesthetic categories (Barthes 2020, 32-33) here: while the photography of the American West pictured how progress transgressed the landscape, modern day representation reveals the return of the repressed, that is, the visual emptying out of the civic dimension through the newly formed analogies of the West. In the case of the photographic landscape, the ontology involved in the imagery of the being-there of the photographs of the West become haunted, revealing the *hantologie* of the present images.

What it amounts to is no less than the breakdown of the constitutional dichotomy of the myth of the West: the polar opposites collapse into an in-divisible flux, another spatial configuration that is still able to sustain itself but does it differently. I do not mean to argue that the vision of the frontier or the foundational myth of the American West disappears - on the contrary: it insists even more powerfully.

Haunting topologies

To dissect the intricacy of such a breakdown of dichotomies, I first turn to Lacan's concept of extimacy, which is a spatial revision of the Freudian Unheimlich. For psychoanalysis, the binary of inside and outside is configured differently: the unconscious, for example, is not something solely inside the subject's psyche, but is present in intersubjective encounters as well, since the Other is "something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me" (Lacan 1992, 71). This is why in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the subject is "ex-centric" (Lacan 1977, 171), as the center, the defining core of the subject is always alien, foreign to it – in other words, the inside is outside, while the outside is also inside (Lacan 1977, 165). This is what is captured in the more topological figuration of the psychic dynamics: the intimate kernel of subjectivity is not in opposition to the outside but in fact it depends on it, hence the external is infused with the intimate as well. Extimacy, therefore, signals the breakdown of the dichotomy between the polar opposites of inside and outside (Lacan 1992, 139), mapping the impossible and inaccessible space between them.

What it points to in terms of the insistence of the frontier outside the timeframe and scope of the frontier myth is that the very intimacy in picturing the core of the frontier photographs becomes the extimate of the contemporary images. One might go as far as to think of them as two sides of the same photograph, or as a juxtaposition *a'la* Sergei Eizenstein' montage, where the separate images coagulate in what Bartes called "the third meaning": the ultimate message of the sequence realized within the psyche of the beholder. It is this haunting presence of the long-gone frontier that transpires through Lee's images.

Another useful theorization of the intricacy of space and topographical realities is Edward Soja's reconceptualization of Henri Lefebvre's trialectics of space which helps us leaving behind the powerful structural polarization of ideas will yield stronger connotations and a more topologically oriented rethinking of the image of the American West. The collapse of the foundational binary opposition reminds us of what Edward W. Soja calls "thirding," which is "a critical "other-than" choice that speaks and critiques through its otherness" (Soja 1996, 61)

transcending the stages of dialectical analysis. Building on Henri Lefebvre's basic trialectics of space, Soja introduces a palimpsest and flexible structure of Firstspace, Secondspace and Thirdspace that allow thinking about space in the social and political dimensions without exerting preference of any of these over the others.

Thirdspace, which roughly corresponds to Lefebvre's category of "spaces of representation" (or lived space) as Soja explains, is both "distinct from the other two spaces" and encompasses them. It embodies "'complex symbolisms'" as "[i]t overlays … physical space, making symbolic use of its objects' and tends towards 'more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs'. [H]ere we can find not just the spatial representations of power but the imposing and operational power of spatial representations" (68) - in other words, it is in this notion that we can see how representational topology, through photography in our case, is able to develop and sustain a myth. According to Soja,

> *Everything* comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and unconsciousness, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history. (56-57)

The breakdown of binary systems of thought on space opens the way to think about specific topologies as "[s]paces of representation [that] contain all other real and imagined spaces simultaneously" (69). The Thirdspace of the American west is composed through a photographic mapping of the frontier, emerging from the very slash that separates the polars of the binary and also, transgressing space along the railway line, from the slit of the topography where wilderness and civilization converge. It is this *ontopology*, this uncanny and haunting event that nurtures the photographic space that symbolically underpins the myth, re-emerging ever more powerfully - a return of the dead, the frontier haunts.

In this light, thirding the photographic topology of the American West becomes akin to the shift in perceiving photography as analogy, as Silverman explains. With the multiplied images of the West, photography is seen as an ever evolving, shifting, negotiated relational field that becomes the repository of different times, subjects, objects, spaces and images, participating in an ongoing visual relationship between the seer, the seen, and the image itself. Through Soja's conceptualization of the Thirdspace, Silverman's concept of analogy is appropriated as an ongoing visual and topological continuum.

It is here that Baudrillard's mission impossible becomes *real*ized: through the photographic double-exposure of the past and the present, the frontier and the myth of the American West *takes place*. It *is* the Thirdspace of America. The images of the desolate, abandoned gas stations, factories or civic spaces are ontopologically connected to the Western image, and they recreate its topological coordinates. They anamorphically hark back to an analogy that sustains a myth: they reveal the opposite of the narrative of the myth by referring us back to the ontopological moment of Western photography of progress made possible by the mark of wilderness.

This, then, conceals a *double ontopology*: it moves further than simply designating the here-and-now of the ontogenesis of the image to expose the thirdspace of representation by analogizing, the same-but-different topography as a future anterior. This "will-have-been" of the American myth is created and sustained by the topological insistence of the *photontology* that encompasses the birth of the vision of the myth and also the return of its Other.

In other words, the technologization of nature had always already been predicated upon the insistence of the natural - hence the haunting, spectral quality of the contemporary photographs of the abandoned project of progress. However, it is this very insistence and haunting that de-temporalizes the myth of the American West, shaping and composing a topology that becomes a space of representation to be lived (and thus believed). From the foundational ontology of the American West, we find ourselves in the *hantologie* of photographic

space, and the frontier thus becomes the Real of the vision of the West, stubbornly insisting in our topological imagination.

Photographs by Jason Lee from *A Plain View* (https://www.jasonleefilm.com/a-plain-view-splash) are reproduced here with the artist's exclusive permission.

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