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Looking Back at Watkins

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Carleton Watkins. *Mirror View of the North Dome, Yosemite*, 1865–66. Albumen print. Lent by Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries

Maybe I was first attracted to *Mirror View of the North Dome, Yosemite* (1865–66, fig. X) because I had hiked Yosemite National Park's North Dome Trail. Starting in the high country, after about five miles, you emerge onto the dome's back, where the whole valley is displayed. Straight ahead, the face of Half Dome; looking left, the vast, scoured

surface of Clouds Rest; and on the right, a long view down the valley toward El Capitan. The Merced River wends its way among trees and fields at your feet. An unforgettable experience. Of course I took pictures of the stupendous cliffs and yawning distances.

Millions have seen Yosemite this way, looking out from different promontories and trails. And today, almost everything about Yosemite is a cliché—a thoroughly familiar sublime. We have Carleton Watkins to thank for that, along with Ansel Adams and a horde of professional and amateur image collectors. Yet this particular “mirror view” seemed fresh to me. I realized that I had never really looked at North Dome. Facing the more spectacular Half Dome (just outside the frame of Watkins’s image), North Dome’s rather modest hump slopes down to the precipice of Washington Column. It is very much part of a flowing landscape. And this was what interested me, the image’s horizontal dynamism—so different from the vertical thrust of Watkins’s granite monoliths or his tall, gushing waterfalls.

Here the river dominates, both as a reflecting surface and as a visual conduit. Everything seems to move from left to right, and inward. The eye is drawn into an endlessly winding valley, and down into watery reflection—a saturated reflection, somehow more real than its pale source. In the middle ground, the bright triangle of a jutting riverbank is repeated in the dark water behind it. There is no single plane on which the picture’s reflection hinges (compare the static reflection in views such as *Mirror Lake, Yosemite, 1865–66, fig. X*). The lines here are active, intersecting.

A sculptural dead tree pokes through the water. It repeats the chevron motif, thus mirroring the image’s structural lines of composition. One could go on in this vein. The image is beautifully composed, and thoroughly conventional. A classic landscape of the European painting tradition: limpid reflection in the foreground, winding pathway leading back (road, path, river, or stream), and mountains or vistas in the distance. An absorbing image. I need to remind myself that this view of a “natural” place has been artfully created by selecting an angle of vision. It gathers its scene by leaving out inconvenient things. In 1865, many traces of “civilization” were already part of the Yosemite landscape: camps, sheds, horses, and mules. Three hundred sixty tourists made the difficult trek that year, with many more to come. Permanent accommodations were under construction not very far from Watkins’s box camera, chemicals, and developing tent. This would soon become the center of Yosemite Valley’s development. Today, just beneath the Royal Arches rock formation, visible in the photograph, stands the luxury Ahwahnee Hotel.



A digital photograph I took from the top of North Dome points along Yosemite Valley directly toward the riverbank where Watkins set up his camera (*Looking West from North Dome*, 2007, fig. X). Now, as I contemplate Watkins's image, I see myself looking back, through space and time: a different kind of mirror view. In my shot, trees cover the parking lots and campgrounds, but a short stretch of paved roadway is visible. On the left, Sentinel Dome, and in the distance, Cathedral Spires: giant rocks named by invaders.

Rebecca Solnit, in *Savage Dreams* (2000), tells the story of Yosemite's misnaming by an armed band who would expel local Native Americans in 1851, thus clearing a space for white appropriation. She brilliantly explores the exclusions and foreshortenings that went into the representation, the "framing" of a destination as a masterpiece of wild nature. Non-Indian viewers perceived Yosemite in the 1860s through conventions of the Alpine sublime, picturesque landscapes, and the atmospheric English garden—with crucial help from the new medium of photography. The spectacular setting would soon be packaged and reproduced, for aesthetic contemplation and for tourism—modes of perception radically at odds with indigenous concepts of place. The land's inhabitants, the Ahwahnechee, could have no place in this "nature." They had called their homeland Ahwahnee, meaning *mouth*. Each summer, the Ahwahnechee tended the valley's oak communities, using controlled fires to foster regrowth. The acorns they harvested were a staple of their winter subsistence. Ahwahnee, an inhabited place, was anything but wild nature.

My absorption in this lovely image no doubt still owes something to these methods of framing nature. Yet times have changed, and I bring interests to the scene that are different from those of Watkins's audience. I have read Solnit. I am aware that the state's first people did not disappear, as predicted by the historical vision of California's settlers. Noticing the oak trees on the river's left bank, I think, now, of the Ahwahnechee. And the landscape's intimacy and scale, unusual in Yosemite Valley

photographs, suggests a place of dwelling, not of sublime wonder. Distance and monumentality are contained, and vision is turned on itself. Half the image is reflection, but not in a whole—or exact—mirror. There are places of deep darkness, and areas of incredible lucidity.

A thin border of scraggly plants and an uneven shoreline frame the photograph on the lower right. These plants are, for me, what Roland Barthes might call a “punctum,” a poignant detail to which I return obsessively.¹ Perhaps I am experiencing what the first viewers felt when they encountered these pictures: sheer wonder at their incredible detail, a feeling of being able to see every crack of rock, each leaf or pebble. This was photography’s magic in 1865. And it still is. The photograph’s irrefutable testimony: a record of what was before the lens, capturing more than the person who framed the scene could have perceived. As these mammoth prints traveled, Yosemite would become real for many people across the newly continental United States, and beyond. They discovered, as if they were there, a wonder of the world.

A century and a half later, I still experience something like this magical presence, but differently. I encounter not just the overwhelming reality of a place, but its temporality as well. Inspecting the twigs and branches of the foreground, I see that bits of grass have caught and dried there, remnants of a recent time when the river flowed higher. And alongside the tattered shoreline I discover, and mentally compose, a living branch and some grasses poking through the surface, artfully reflected. (Carleton Watkins. *Mirror View of the North Dome, Yosemite, 1865–66*. Detail. Fig 11)

¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).



I see these things as they actually were, in that minute of exposure before Watkins's lens. And these small tokens of an exact reality—the messy branches, the tiny composition in the water—are irretrievably gone. Refocusing, I stand back to take in the whole image and am suddenly looking through a window that organizes a past. This “view” has been composed, circulated, admired, and marketed in all the ways that become significant when we historicize, as we must.

The temporal flux I feel when examining those twigs and stranded grasses is a different sort of evidence: not about codes or audiences, the kinds of things that interest social historians or cultural critics. It is another “realism,” evoked by Barthes: “The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the objects but on time.”²

When I experience, up close, the undeniably real presence of things that will never exist again, it is the nonrecurring passage of time that I am “seeing.” Barthes famously asserts that the photograph secretes death—in its fundamental claim of past existence: *ça a été*. He is looking at pictures of people whose lives have ended or will end. But the temporality captured by Watkins is more a matter of transformation than of

² Ibid., 88–89.

death. Yes, my weeds and twigs, now gone, have “died.” But the Merced River and North Dome persist. Future photographs will register their presence, renamed perhaps, their outlines altered.

Of course, one day they too will no longer be there. And this opens a deep, geological time, changes unfolding at a nonhuman (nonvegetable, nonanimal) pace, vast intervals that are hard to grasp and not well served by vitalist metaphors. Such nonhuman times can be felt in virtually every Yosemite photograph. The creative and destructive agencies of glaciers, water, and weather are everywhere in evidence.

Looking back at Watkins, we encounter multiple temporalities working at different tempos and scales. In the presence of his mammoth prints, we constantly refocus, moving among discrepant times that cannot be summed up, or braided into a coherent thread.

Such is our “historical” predicament.