

Observation Points: The Visual Poetic of National Parks. THOMAS PATIN, ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. Pp. ix+296, maps, photos, diagrams, index. \$27.50 paperback. ISBN 978-0-8166-5146-7.

As a collection, *Observation Points* travels a wide and satisfying intellectual path. Across thirteen chapters, editor Thomas Patin pins together themes and contributors from a variety of disciplines including art history, political science, English and literature, geography, and communication studies that examine how visual rhetoric in and about American national parks have been employed as “discursive apparatuses that have produced, limited, and shaped discourses on nature, including human nature, and have justified particular social policies and cultural preferences as natural and necessary” (p. xiii). Patin draws on the scholarship of W.J.T. Mitchell and asks us to interrogate visual rhetoric in national parks so as to reveal the deliberate and mediated nature of landscape design, display, and presentation. National park material and practices are thereby implicated as agents of social power that naturalize nationalistic, environmental, political, and imperial “culturally specific concepts or social arrangements” (p. xv).

Observation Points is bound through the lens of national parks and monuments – and that is part of its genius. The landscapes and material culture presented are all familiar territory and represent the grandest examples of America’s “best idea.” Two essays focus on Yellowstone National Park. Others discuss Zion, Grand Canyon, and Chaco Canyon. Three of the thirteen essays are located in the Black Hills of South Dakota and examine Mt. Rushmore. The omission of less-known parks, including parks and monuments in locations east of the Mississippi River could be a point of criticism. However, as a whole the book is theoretically rich and the variety of mediums explored – including national park landscapes, architecture, film, visitor publications, and landscape paintings associated with national parks and monuments – provides the reader with a framework for extending this analysis to other public landscapes.

The book is loosely organized and following an introductory essay on virtual rhetoric by Patin, the reader is treated to a multiplicity of perspectives. Some of the more satisfying essays are those that address the built environment. Robert Bednar shows how national park managers designed landscape devices – scenic overlooks, visitor center displays, road and boundary signs – to control the vistas, experiences, and meaning imbedded in the landscape. In doing so, these landscapes become the “medium through which the national parks present themselves as natural landscapes” (p. 3). Peter Peters examined how national park roads were redesigned in the 1950s and 1960s to control the onslaught of modernizing American tourists. Road design was standardized so visitors could experience the park through their windshield – thereby imbedding a certain sense of independence and adventure in what was ultimately a highly-controlled circulation system. Patin’s essay on the “ruins” of Chaco Culture National Historical Park provides an enlightening discussion on the museological rhetoric of presentation and reveals why the ruins are continually stabilized and reinforced – just as visitors’ preconceptions and mythologies of Chaco civilization are similarly stabilized and reinforced.

Several of essays explore the legacy of visual rhetoric present in imagery from and about the national parks. Geographer Gareth John implicates Thomas Moran’s sweeping and detailed landscapes of Yellowstone and the photographs of William Henry Jackson as being “formative of what Yellowstone would become and, in part, how it would be understood thereafter” (p. 141). These grand images were utilized by boosters and provided examples of the sublime, powerful, and nationalistic qualities of a post-Civil War America connected by a transcontinental railroad. Teresa Bergman analyzed the effect of patriotic rhetoric presented three orientation films shown at Mount Rushmore National Memorial. She suggests that each of these films naturalize cultural

trends in the monument. Themes of heroic endeavors and American exceptionalism run through the first and third film and are representative of early Cold War and Reagan-era sentiment. The second film is subdued in tone and content; Bergman ties this to the doubts and confusion of the Vietnam era. Mark Neumann treats the reader to an interesting discussion on how popular spectacles at the Grand Canyon – most notably attempts to jump the Canyon in cars, skateboards, and motorcycles – served as performances that at once resisted and also reinforced pre-defined rhetoric surrounding Grand Canyon.

Though only one of the book contributors is a geographer, historical geographers will find much worth in *Observation Points*. Patin and company provide a strong and usable theoretical lens to examine landscape creation and function. It is an approachable volume well-suited for upper division and graduate courses. Furthermore, it is a useful guide for students of public lands, American studies, and landscape.

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