

MONUMENT VALLEYS

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This is a curious situation. Here I am in a Northern, Atlantic, Celtic landscape, dark stone, grey light, damp in the air, writing an essay to be read on the other side of Europe, in a dry, southern, Mediterranean landscape. These are opposite landscapes in many ways, but at least they share certain cultural assumptions. What I am writing about, however, is yet another landscape, at the heart of another continent, 8,000 miles to the West, an alien landscape, unlike anything we could see on this continent of ours.

Yet we all recognise this landscape. Monument Valley. We know where it is and what it means. It is the West, it is America. It is in its way as familiar to us as our own landscapes, even if we have never been there. For what we have seen are images – many, many images – of this place, and through these images, this has become a mythic landscape.

It is undoubtedly mythic for the people who live on that continent, though its significance will be very different for white Americans and for the Navajo. For the former, it is a landscape they have taken over, and its very name places it alongside other national icons of progress and expansion: the Empire State Building, Mount Rushmore, the Apollo Space Mission. For the Navajo, on the other hand, it's a landscape they have held on to, and each rock will have a meaning that an outsider can never understand. But this is also a mythic landscape when seen from afar, and I can speak more confidently about what Monument Valley means over here. So this must be a European view of the American West – more specifically, a British view, posed against the complicated history that relates my country to that country yet also separates us.

If those are the horizontal relationships of this subject, moving in complex patterns back and forth across the surface of the globe, there are also vertical layerings which determine how we will understand this place. Another European, Jean Baudrillard, went there and described those layerings: "Monument Valley is the geology of the earth, the mausoleum of the Indians, and the camera of John Ford. It is erosion, it is extermination, but it is also the tracking shot, the movies. All three are mingled in the vision of it. And each phase subtly terminates the preceding one."¹

It is surprising to discover how recent the fame of Monument Valley is. As far as I can discover, none of the surveyors, artists and photographers who crossed the West in the 19th century made any images of this place; Timothy O'Sullivan must have passed near there, but he left no record of it. It's not often one can be specific about the source of a myth, but this one (so the myth about the myth goes) came from an accidental meeting in 1938. Only one white man lived in the valley then: Harry Goulding, who ran the trading post. Seeking ways to alleviate the poverty of the Indian population, he put together an album of photographs and headed off to Hollywood to see if he could interest any film companies in using the area as a movie-set. One office he walked into was that of John Ford, who was preparing a Western: *Stagecoach*. Ford only used a few shots of the valley in the film, but they made an indelible impression, both on the audience and on the film-maker himself. He returned to Monument Valley for six more films in the next twenty years, and it's because of those movies that we all know Monument Valley so well.

I don't know how typical my own experience of these films has been. Growing up with them,

watching *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* on television on a wet Sunday afternoon, and then going out to play 'Cowboys and Indians'. Becoming ever more sceptical – in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate – of their apparently too easy, too affirmative embodiment of the (white man's) National Myth of "how the West was won". Later still, studying the films more closely and realising how rich and complex and sometimes difficult (at this point *The Searchers* became a key work) they actually are. And, finally, sitting down just to watch them again on television on a Sunday afternoon.

And behind all that human action, the landscape – forbidding, unshifting, monumental. It's worth pointing out that all of Ford's westerns actually take place elsewhere in the West; *The Searchers*, for example, starts with the title "Texas, 1868". Likewise, the characters move around the space in a quite unrealistic way: Ethan and Marty in *The Searchers* wander across the West for seven years, yet never seem to leave the Valley. The Cheyenne in Cheyenne Autumn go on a 1000-mile trek to their homeland, their journey both starting and ending in the Valley. Monument Valley is in reality a quite particular site some thirty miles across; in Ford's films, it becomes the mythic West of the imagination.

It's in the nature of such a powerful myth that later artists will imitate it, pay homage to it, deconstruct it, parody it. Such multi-layered referencing is, of course, also symptomatic of the postmodern times in which we live. Thus films as various as *Easy Rider*, *Once Upon a Time in the West*, *Back to the Future III* and *Forrest Gump* all contain scenes shot in Monument Valley. It's also been an important site for the new 'postmodern' landscape photography which has emerged in the West in the past few years, though here it's not only the example of Ford that is important but also that of Ansel Adams, who represents in still photography a parallel tradition of heroic mythologisation. Photographers as various as Len Jenschel, Mark Klett, Cindy Sherman, Cindy Bernard, Meridel Rubinstein, John Pfahl, Skett McAuley, and from France, Raymond Depardon and Bernard Plossu have all made images which variously refer to the classic imagery of Ford and Adams, yet find new ways to speak about the contemporary cultural meanings of this landscape.

I went to Monument Valley in 1992. Since returning, I've been haunted by the place, and in Wales, London, Prague, Rome, Paris, Salonika, I've found images of it which suggest how deeply its image has permeated our European culture. I've felt overwhelmed by a deluge of imagery, yet all of it at second hand; where does myth shift into cliché? I know that now, at century's end, we can only speak of Monument Valley with an air of knowing irony.

Yet I remember standing out there, as the sun went down, taking the camera slowly from my eye, kicking my boot in the red dust. Standing, staring, in awe of pure geology. For a moment, nothing else existed. I had to move on of course, leave, get back on the road, come back to 'real life'. But, circumscribed as the experience has since been by a cacophony of images and ideas, that moment stays with me, haunts whatever I can say about that place, that landscape, that myth.

1 Jean Baudrillard, *America*, Verso, 1989.