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Complicating the Reading of Nineteenth-Century American Landscape Painting: Albert Bierstadt's Western Visions, Aesthetics, and Sociology

Michaela Keck

Institute for English/American Studies
Carl von Ossietzky University, Germany

Abstract

Albert Bierstadt's panoramic landscapes have always polarized the general public, critics, and scholars. For some, they represent the wonders of an exceptional natural world and society; for others they express the disturbing, megalomaniac history of nineteenth-century American conquest. While such binary opposites are overly simplistic, they have continued to shape the public and scholarly debate regarding representations of American nature. Based on the notion of an aesthetic perception of nature as landscape, and on sociologist Norbert Elias's figurational conception of the "involvement and detachment" between human spectators and nature, this article will explore the multilayered, heterogeneous cultural forces at work in *Toward the Setting Sun* (1862) and *The Oregon Trail* (1869). The contesting forces inherent in *Toward the Setting Sun* will be examined in the light of Bierstadt's transcultural walking figure, while the different situational negotiations of American and European readings will help to shed light on *The Oregon Trail*. I will argue that Bierstadt's Indian walking figure in *Toward the Setting Sun* represents the aesthetic experience of nature as landscape, as well as the protest against growing social pressures within a wider social context, and Bierstadt's desire to market his art on the level of the individual. To Americans, *The Oregon Trail* likewise expresses social anxieties insofar as it reveals the aggressive capitalism of the Gilded Age and the dictates of the international marketplace. To Europeans, however, it promises a secure, independent life removed from war-plagued social conditions and economic deprivation.

Keywords

nineteenth-century American landscape painting, Albert Bierstadt, aesthetics, sociology
Norbert Elias, involvement, detachment