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

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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
Of Twentieth-Century Revisionist Strategies and Nineteenth-Century American Landscape Painting

The revisionist readings of nineteenth-century American landscape painting have left us a legacy that oscillates between insightful revelations of the manifold layers of ideology, power, and aesthetics and, at times, self-righteous misogynist rhetoric that obfuscates the complexities inherent in the works of American landscapists. Indeed, these artworks have been used as contested pawns in battles over ideological concerns of past and present, a historical case in point being the exhibition “The West as America” that was held at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., in 1991. While some declared that this exhibition had successfully deconstructed the landscapes of a heroic West and made transparent the canvases’ inherent messages of Manifest Destiny and westward expansionism, others questioned the exhibition’s reliance on rhetoric and grandiloquence in the attempted demystification and demythification of the American West.¹

While the controversy concerning the 1991 exhibition serves as a useful reminder that every scholarly perception adds its own interpretative layer to the complex negotiations in cultural artifacts, some of the rhetorical excesses of revisionist readings have shaped—and continue to shape—our present understanding of nineteenth-century representations of American landscapes. This article will attempt to provide a corrective to the revisionist legacy by complicating the reading of two of Albert Bierstadt’s western visions: Toward the Setting Sun (1862)² and The Oregon Trail (1869).³ The latter is almost interchangeable with an earlier painting by Bierstadt entitled Emigrants Crossing the Plains (1867). These nearly identical artworks have come to epitomize both the ideological thrust of westward expansion and, arguably, the misleading and erroneous assumption that

¹ Curator William H. Truettner states that the exhibition intended to “strip away the layers of meaning that paintings of the West have acquired in our time” and to “offer a transparent view of what was then construed as national purpose” (36). While Roger B. Stein clearly favors and reiterates the exhibition’s overall revisionist rhetoric (418-38), Bryan J. Wolf, although careful not to antagonize Truettner, Stein et al., offers a much more differentiated and critical discussion (Stein 418-38). Andrew Gulliford, in turn, publishes the diverse visitors’ responses as recorded in the comment books (77-80).


viewers have uncritically succumbed—and still succumb—to such visual representations of nationalist propaganda and ideology.⁴ Hence, this article will investigate the heterogeneous socio-cultural forces and processes at work in these two paintings, while also exploring the negotiated readings opened up for nineteenth-century viewers by the pressures resulting from these forces and processes.

A number of art historians have pointed out that Bierstadt’s contemporaries were not as gullible as revisionist readings suggest. According to art critics like Matthew Baigell, Gordon Hendricks, Nancy K. Anderson, and Linda S. Ferber, Bierstadt and his landscapes have always polarized American museum-goers, art critics, art institutions, and the press. In his 1974 monograph, Hendricks remarks that “[w]hatever is said about Bierstadt now, much worse was said during his lifetime” (Bierstadt 9).⁵ Indeed, Bierstadt’s steep rise to fame in the early 1860s was soon followed by a fall that would have been just as precipitous, had he not been such a notoriously indefatigable businessman whose aggressive marketing kept him

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⁴ In his review of “The West as America,” Stein warns that Emigrants Crossing the Plain is a “lodestone” that would draw the “viewer toward its refulgent glow” but also “overwhelm viewers (as the artists intended . . .), destroying the critical and questioning sensibility which it was this exhibition’s aim to generate and support” (88-89). Wolf compares the exhibition with Phineas T. Barnum’s nineteenth-century museum hoaxes. As Wolf explains, Barnum’s success lay in the playful re-enactment of the audience’s discovery of the hoaxes, which allowed the visitor to be freed for a moment from the hierarchies of education, class, ethnicity, or gender within the institutionalized museum space (419-20). But what distinguishes nineteenth-century viewers from those of today is the fact that Barnum’s contemporaries knew what they were in for before they bought their tickets. Wolf’s comparison therefore grants the present-day museum audience a dubitable moment of power and knowledge at best.

⁵ The notion that Bierstadt and other landscapists intentionally and effectively naturalize nineteenth-century expansionist ideologies persists in the present-day scholarly discussion of their works. In his comparison of Bierstadt’s paintings and Cooper’s fictional landscapes Martin Heusser, for instance, evaluates Bierstadt’s The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak as a realist work that “silences and disarticulates . . . other discourses” (155). And for American Studies scholar Winfried Fluck the theatricality of the Hudson River School, when viewed from a modern perspective (as opposed to that of nineteenth-century viewers), constitutes a performance of the purely spectacular that is devoid of the Burkean terror of the sublime and any spiritual-transcendental dimensions (98-99). To Fluck these works come close to becoming empty ciphers or mere conventions. What I find problematic here is not only Fluck’s interchangeable use of theatricality (or staged excess) and performance, but also his sharp distinction between a nineteenth-century dominant reading of national ideology and a constructivist, presumably oppositional reading of the landscapes, neither of which does justice to the complexities of the works themselves nor to the readings of nineteenth-century or present-day viewers.
financially afloat even as his reputation in America waned. By the end of the 1860s, when he painted *The Oregon Trail*, the two major critics on the American art scene, James Jackson Jarves and Clarence Cook, attacked his work as “pretentious” and as “vulgar, scenic art” that lacked imagination as well as emotion, and attracted viewers “by clap-trap expedients” (qtd. in Ferber 29). Similarly, nineteenth-century reviews in *The New York Tribune*, the *Independent*, and *The Sun* criticized the artificiality of Bierstadt’s landscapes. We can therefore assume that the average viewer was familiar with—and perhaps shared—the views of these critics. Bierstadt’s *The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak* (1863), for instance, was considered to be “wondrously full of invention” (qtd. in Anderson 77), and a critic from the *New York Leader*, who hailed the painting’s landscape as a symbol of future greatness, clearly understood it to be a virtual icon, that is, to express a potential neither real nor yet realized. However, the ever-critical Jarves scathingly judged the painting to be “mere rhetorical oratory” (qtd. in Ferber 30). Clearly, not all of Bierstadt’s contemporaries were swept off their feet by his panoramas, yet both critics and admirers understood the paintings to be representations of the American West.

As Angela Miller has pointed out, we have to bear in mind the fact that late nineteenth-century localized, regional art which offered an appealing alternative to exorbitant, mid-century landscape painting was just as much an invention as the earlier grand vistas that dominated American landscape painting until the 1860s (224). Hence caution, self-reflection, and a thorough immersion in nineteenth-century responses and evaluations are required, whether we examine landscapes and their significance reflecting excess à la Bierstadt or the self-containment of Luminist painters such as Martin Johnson Heade. According to Stuart Hall,  

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6 Jarves authored two important volumes on art history and criticism (1864; 1869); Cook was the art critic of the *New York Tribune*.

7 The critic further wrote: “. . . I feel that this is a glimpse into the heart of the continent towards which civilization is struggling; and the grey peaks, in their massive grandeur, seem to me to be wrapt in a romance new, and fresh, and breezy. It is the romance of the new. . . . This, to me, is the power of the picture. I know that the nation’s future greatness is somehow dimly seen in the great West. This picture is a view into the penetralia of destiny as well as nature” (qtd. in Anderson 77-78; emphasis in original).

8 Perhaps best known for his numerous paintings of (salt) marshes at all times of the day and in all kinds of atmospheric and weather conditions, Heade makes the artifice of his landscapes the subject of *Gremlin in the Studio I and II* (c. 1865-1875). In between the timber trestles underneath the canvas, a gremlin plays its tricks. Mischievously, the peculiar stick-figure glances at the canvas above while to the right water gushes from the painted marsh and onto the studio’s floor. Heade thus exposes his marsh landscapes as being illusory and surreal.
representations “have conditions of existence and real effects outside the sphere of the discursive” and “play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role” (443; emphasis in original). At the same time, representations are constituted by our memory as well as our imagination, and therefore they manifest dialogical tensions, conflicts, and interrelations between the past, present, and future. In short, representations are highly heterogeneous textures, an understanding of whose complexity and multiple layers requires an equally complex reconstruction of their production. If we want to more fully comprehend past representations of American nature, we need to make visible their heterogeneity rather than reduce them to mere illustrations of our own interpretations.

While I will explore the conflicting forces inherent in Toward the Setting Sun through a closer examination of Bierstadt’s Indian walking figure, the different situational negotiations of American and European viewers will shed light on The Oregon Trail. Basing my readings on the notion of an aesthetic perception of “nature as landscape” and on sociologist Norbert Elias’s figurational conception of “involvement and detachment” between humankind and nature, I will be better able to highlight the variegated socio-cultural forces at work in Bierstadt’s representations of these (western) American landscapes. Elias’s figurational conception is particularly fruitful in that it takes into account the interdependence and simultaneity of different, at times contradictory mindsets vis-à-vis nature on both individual and social levels. Hence, I shall argue that Bierstadt’s transcultural walking figure in Toward the Setting Sun combines the western (Romantic) notion of an aesthetic experience of nature with a protest against growing social pressures and with the artist’s need to market his art. To Americans, The Oregon Trail likewise expresses palpable social anxieties about growing domestic entanglements and frictions, that is, about the aggressive capitalism of the Gilded Age and the dictates of the (inter)national marketplace. To Europeans, however, it promises a secure and independent life removed from war-plagued societies and economic deprivation. In order to understand the aesthetic notion of “nature as landscape” that underlies Elias’s conception of the polarities of “involvement and detachment” in the relationship between humankind and nature, it will be useful to briefly outline the trajectory of the European landscape experience, beginning with Francesco Petrarca’s legendary ascent of Mont Ventoux in April 1335, which prefigures a major paradigm shift toward an aesthetic perception of nature.
Nature as Landscape and the Polarities of “Involvement and Detachment”

Petrarch’s letter describing his ascent of Mt. Ventoux prepares the ground for an aesthetic perception of “nature as landscape” which would be decisive in shaping both Old World and New World conceptions and depictions of nature. Although motivated by “no other purpose than a desire to see what the great height was like” (45), Petrarch is still restrained by the θεωρία τού κόσμου (theoria tou cosmou), that is, the traditional contemplation of God through nature. However, he already anticipates that personal delight in nature for nature’s sake alone that would later constitute the aesthetic perception of nature as landscape. Although Petrarch does not yet leave a bustling city life for his mountain experience, his ascent of Mt. Ventoux already foreshadows modern ways of knowing and being in nature that require leaving behind one’s workplace and an understanding of nature as a subject fit for contemplation and representation. However, he still lacks the linguistic and visual tools that would come to frame and underpin later panoramic vistas taken in from mountain peaks. In the course of the next few centuries, Europeans would develop a variety of conventions for viewing, representing, and experiencing nature within their specific cultural and historical contexts. As Ernst H. Gombrich puts it in Art and Illusion, “we cannot disentangle seeing from knowing, or rather, from expecting” (223). Indeed, our knowledge and expectations constitute the essential tools for decoding nature, but once these tools have become conventions they begin to restrain future generations of nature-lovers, just as the classical tradition of nature as cosmos imposed limitations on Petrarch. As a matter of fact, the nature worship of the wider, transatlantic Romantic Movement has provoked painters and poets to poke fun at those who seek out nature with their noses and their senses buried in books or handbooks that prescribe how one is to perceive, experience, and delight in nature.10

9 Even though Petrarch’s letter is based on an actual mountain-climbing experience, scholars agree that it is a cautious and artful composition written in the early 1350s (Billanovich 459).

10 I am well aware that Romanticism can by no means be seen as a homogeneous cultural movement. Still, there are distinctive commonalities and also in a transatlantic context, one of which is, as I suggest here, the compensatory turn to nature as landscape. For nineteenth-century Euro-American settlers the conjuncture of uncultivated land and expanding cultivated areas of land was as much a boon as a bane. It was both beneficial and threatening, and helped shape America’s national identity as something distinct from that of Europe. Furthermore, the disappearing “wilderness” was not only a sign of progress but a constant reminder of the dark side of national growth and expansion.
Notwithstanding its cultural, national, and regional variations, the rise of the concept of “nature as landscape” culminates in the acceptance of landscape painting, nature writing, and poetry as distinct genres in the arts and letters, a development accompanied by a number of profound changes in the social order, in particular the emergence of the middle classes, that were closely tied to industrialization, urbanization, and technological innovations. As Joachim Ritter explains, the (Romantic) turn to nature must be understood as a compensatory act: venturing out into nature constitutes the attempt to re-encounter, even temporarily recover, nature at a time when civilization and social progress were eliminating it (18-25). Hence a nostalgic mood, a sense of loss and alienation often pervade these encounters with nature, and the relationship between humankind and nature is oftentimes depicted as a union that has been ruptured. The binaries thus evoked, mourned, as well as overcome, are hardly helpful in the reconstruction of past conceptions of nature. And yet, these binaries continue to grow wider as our ever-accelerating computerization and mechanization makes ever more difficult any direct and immediate interconnection between humankind and nature.

Sociologist Norbert Elias understands the aesthetic experience of nature as a characteristic of a society that has become highly detached from it, that is, a characteristic of most western industrial societies and their individuals. But even if there can be little doubt that humankind has come a long way from its emotive and affect-laden response to nature—Elias uses the terms “subjective” and “irrational” for “involved,” and “objective” and “rational” for “detached”—he

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11 W. J. T. Mitchell further suggests that as a “pseudohistorical myth” the “discourse of landscape is a crucial means for enlisting ‘Nature’ in the legitimation of modernity, of the claim that ‘we moderns’ are somehow different from and essentially superior to everything that preceded us, free of superstition and convention, masters of a unified, natural language epitomized by landscape painting” (13). At the same time, I want to caution against understanding the aesthetic experience of “nature as landscape” in purely constructionist terms. As Jonathan Bate and others have argued, such a notion underrates nature as a material basis of culture and overlooks what Kate Rigby calls nature’s “more-than-human-genesis” (4).

12 “... [T]he concepts ... which, in societies like ours, all individuals use ... represent a relatively high degree of detachment; so does the socially induced experience of nature as a ‘landscape’ or as ‘beautiful’. ... Compared with previous ages control of emotions in experiencing nature, as that of nature itself, has grown. ... Even scientific approaches to nature do not require the extinction of other more involved and emotive forms of approach” (Elias 228). Apart from the English article that was published in the British Journal of Sociology in 1956 there is also an extended German essay by Elias and translator Michael Schröter (printed in 1987). According to Schröter the painstaking collaboration between himself and Elias makes the German version an essay in its own right.
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does not conceive of detachment and involvement as a binary, nor does he think that man’s rational mastery or control of nature can be seen as a linear-progressive development. According to Elias, involvement-detachment is a polarity of processes that are always interdependent. There almost never can be an absolutely engaged or detached attitude towards nature; there is always a balance, a “blend” (228) or an “alloy” (226), of the two. Grounded in an aesthetic perception of nature as landscape this polarity is, I would argue, integral to the Rückenfigur (back-view-figure) of the transcultural walking figure in Toward the Setting Sun, a figure whose detachment from nature is blended with an emotive-moral involvement in it.

The Walking Figure in Toward the Setting Sun

At first glance, Toward the Setting Sun is a prime example of what Renato Rosaldo has called “imperialist nostalgia” (107), that is, the mourning of the loss of what one has helped to destroy. In this particular case, such nostalgia relates to the stereotypical romanticized noble savage whose already-sealed fate, as evident in the orange glow of the setting sun, reflects the rampant nineteenth-century belief in the inevitable extinction of the indigenous tribes still living on the North American continent. The same nostalgia is a crucial part of the accepted role of the artist as an agent in the documentation of history. To use Bierstadt’s own words from a letter sent to The Crayon, during his first journey into the Rocky Mountains with Frederick W. Lander’s survey party in 1859: “The manners and customs of the Indians are still as they were hundreds of years ago and now is the time to paint them, for they are rapidly passing away; and soon will be known only in history. I think that the artist ought to tell his portion of their history as well as the writer; a combination of both assuredly will render it more complete” (qtd. in Hendricks, Bierstadt 337).

Bierstadt’s phrasing confirms what Klaus Lubbers has called the invention of “the white man’s Indian,” which “arose from a set of beliefs and justifications” (181), here the notion that primitive peoples belong to a past age that is bound to disappear under the onslaught of American civilization. This belief is further represented through the emblematic function of indigenous figures in the American “wilderness” as mere staffage, making them wholly subsumed by and equated with nature as, for example, in Asher B. Durand’s Progress (Novak 173). In his letter to

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13 It was upon the experiences of his first two trips to the American West in 1859 and 1863 that Bierstadt’s meteorite-like but short-lived fame from the early through the mid-1860s rested (Ferber 24-27). For Bierstadt’s western journeys, see Hendricks, “Western Journeys” 333-65.
The Crayon Bierstadt himself echoes this conflation of nature and Native Americans that had become an accepted painterly and literary convention by the time he traveled westward. He writes: “[T]he figures of the Indians [are] so enticing, travelling about with their long poles trailing along on the ground, and their picturesque dress, that renders them such appropriate *adjuncts* to the scenery” (qtd. in Hendricks, *Bierstadt* 337; emphasis added). This certainly holds true for the native figures in the middle ground of *Toward the Setting Sun*. Upon closer examination, however, Bierstadt’s native figures are not quite as native, or noble, as the visual cliché demands, and indeed any clear ethnographic appropriation is obfuscated by the ir fuzzy silhouettes. While they are shown as leisurely walkers, rootless rather than rooted in the depicted environment, it is interesting to note that the back-view-figure of the adult Indian in the foreground constitutes a representation distinct from the conventional cipher for America’s “wild” nature. Indeed, this walking figure’s stance indicates that Bierstadt here merges the figure and pose of the European *Spaziergänger* (leisurely walker) with that of a more generalized, more “realistically” conceived Native American.

In the European genre of the walker in both painting and writing, he or she generally turns to nature “out there” to experience what is no longer an integral part of daily life. Thus, rather than being a work-life relationship that is characterized by a thoroughly physical bodily immersion in the world, an immersion based on physical exertion, the experience of nature has primarily become an aesthetic-intellectual perception. In contrast to the walking figure in American culture, rarely do we see the European walker as a worker in nature; in Europe, as Kurt Wölfel has convincingly argued, the compensatory (re)turn to nature and the temporary departure from society provide an act of moral consolidation and purification through the experience of nature as a non-utilitarian space (104).  

In *Toward the Setting Sun*, the aesthetic experience of nature as landscape is emphasized not only by the indistinct rendering of the indigenous figures, but also by the topographically unspecified natural space which does not serve any utilitarian purposes. Hence, the detachment between the walker and nature is expressed by a predominantly aesthetic-intellectual perception of nature as landscape. Even though the turn to nature remains a preeminently mental and intellectual process, impossible to be realized in actuality, the orange-suffused skies evoke a strong emotive response that goes with that compensatory turn to nature.

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and the desire for moral restoration and invigoration. This means that rather than denoting what first appears to be the human figure’s intimate involvement in its natural surroundings, in its degree of detachment Toward the Setting Sun gives us a European, to be more precise, German vision of the artist’s sentimental-aesthetic preservation of nature, as voiced by Friedrich Schiller and as manifested in Caspar David Friedrich’s Nebelmorgen (Foggy Morning, c. 1805).15

For Schiller, it was the poet’s duty to “preserve,” even to “avenge” nature through his art without, however, imitating the classics.16 Although tied to its historical context, the modern preservation that Schiller envisioned as the task of poets and artists was then a form of compromise, an historical and emotive compensation with the full knowledge that whatever was mediated in the artistic process was but a fragment, woefully inadequate to express or present nature as it had been conceived of by the ancients, namely as cosmos or Naturganzes (totality of nature). The attempt to recover the naïve natural sentiments and experiences of the ancients through aesthetic education—a process for which Schiller coined the German term sentimentalisch—would be limited and therefore could never fully recover nature, but it would achieve an ideal synthesis through dialectical reconciliation.17 Evidently, this meant approaching nature through culture, through art, and it was this which for Schiller and other European Romantics constituted the aesthetics most adequate for (European) modern life, a life that was in itself considered to be fragmented, split, full of contrasts.

Perhaps no other artist’s walking figures have come to express this state of fragmentation and alienation, attraction and repulsion, involvement and detachment

16 In his treatise “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry” (1795) Schiller wrote:

Poets everywhere are by definition the preservers of nature. Where they can no longer be so completely and already experience in themselves the destructive influence of arbitrary and artificial forms or have even had to fight against them, then they appear as the witnesses and the avengers of nature. They therefore will either be nature or they will look for lost nature. From this stem two quite different types of poetry, by which the whole poetic territory is exhausted and measured. All poets who really are poets, according to the nature of the period in which they flourish or according to what accidental circumstances have an influence on their general education and on their passing mental state, will belong either to the naïve or the sentimental type. (35; emphasis in original)

17 See Szondi 149-83.
between humankind and nature better than those of the German painter Caspar David Friedrich. In the early sepia and pencil drawing *Foggy Morning*, the tiny walking figure is shown engulfed in nature, whereas many of Friedrich’s later, much larger male and female back-view-figures often block the view to a certain extent, thus emphasizing the state of alienation. In this early drawing, the turn to nature is obvious as the walker, who has stepped outside of his usual life and work in the village that is still visible in the church spire, *takes in* the overall view of the surrounding hills. Supported by his walking stick and accompanied by his dog, the walker-spectator contemplates and *takes in* nature in a way that his everyday life does not provide.

Bierstadt is, on the one hand, easily associated with German art, especially the Düsseldorf School. His mother’s cousin, Johann Peter Hasenclever, was an influential artist there although he was not an instructor at the Düsseldorf Academy. On the other hand, any direct influences on Bierstadt are more difficult to determine. During his four-year stay in Europe (1853 to 1857) Bierstadt did not continuously study at Düsseldorf, but began to undertake extensive travels. He also did not take lessons from any particular artist or artists’ circle.\(^{18}\) Barbara Novak is one of the few art historians who, rather than emphasizing the influence of the Düsseldorf School on American artists, sees “more striking affinities with the Dresden circle of Caspar David Friedrich” (255).\(^{19}\) Indeed, the similarities between Friedrich’s and Bierstadt’s walking figures confirm Novak’s belief that Friedrich and American artists share “attitudes to the world and to picture-making” (255). In this particular case, Friedrich’s contemplative European *Spaziergänger* and Bierstadt’s native back-view-figure share a significant common ground, in particular in these figures’ inherent polarity of detachment and involvement. That is, both walkers express an overall aesthetic-intellectual detachment from nature, one balanced by an emotive-moral, or in Schiller’s sense sentimental (or rather *sentimentalisch*), involvement with nature.

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\(^{18}\) Most scholars name the German painters Carl Friedrich Lessing (1807-1880) and Andreas Achenbach (1827-1905) as important influences (Baigell 8-9; Kornhauser 192). According to Nancy K. Anderson, Ross Merrill, Michael Skalka, and Gordon Hendricks, however, Bierstadt seemed to be more of an autodidact who learned from an eclectic and broad range of “teachers” and influences, e.g., from the American artists Emanuel Leutze and Worthington Whittredge, who took the young Bierstadt under their wings upon his arrival in Düsseldorf, and from the artists’ club that had formed around such masters as Lessing and Achenbach (Anderson, Merrill, and Skalka 28; Hendricks, *Bierstadt* 23-44).

\(^{19}\) The interconnections between Düsseldorf and Dresden as major art centers have not yet been thoroughly investigated.
However, as the following section will demonstrate, the inevitable link of the human and social processes of an aesthetic experience of landscape and an increasing detachment from nature have by no means eliminated forms of deep individual engagement with the natural world. Indeed, the great merit of Elias’s figurational approach is that it can capture and reveal the simultaneous, at times contradictory forms of involvement and detachment at the levels of the individual, the social, and the human in the relationship between humankind and nature.

**Manifestations of Cultural and Social Negotiations in Bierstadt’s Indian Walker**

Like most of Friedrich’s back-view-figures, Bierstadt’s indigenous walker in *Toward the Setting Sun* also serves as a means of identification for the viewer of the painting, which further distinguishes it from the conventional *staffage* of Native Americans. Hence, the combination of the contemplative European *Spaziergänger* and Bierstadt’s “imaginary Indian” inextricably intertwines the fates of the individual spectator with Bierstadt’s “exotic Other.” Not only is the sense of nostalgia and loss that pervades the landscape transported to the spectator as well, but the *Rückenfigur* offers an opportunity for personal identification and allows the observer to enter onto the stage of western lands him/herself. I want to suggest that it is here, on the individual level, and by dint of a personal identification with Bierstadt’s walking figure, that a more affect-laden involvement with nature emerges simultaneously with the generally high degree of detachment on the social level, even if this may seem paradoxical.

As Elias argues in “Problems of Involvement and Detachment,” a greater human mastery over natural powers does not emerge as an isolated phenomenon nor must it be mistaken as a linear-progressive model of history (228ff). Rather, it is a process that involves three different levels: the human, the social, and the individual. To Elias, humankind’s growing detachment from nature simultaneously involves a growing self-control on the level of the individual and the increasing restraints of society upon its individual members. Where, in the early stages of human history, emotions and fears with respect to nature and natural phenomena prevented a detached observation and understanding, the increasing emphasis on self-control and ever greater social restraints on a predominantly affective response
to nature led humankind to increasingly regulate nature for its own purposes. Even though Elias understands the individual and the wider social dimensions to be interdependent, he also considers them to be distinct parts of social structures and processes. This means that, notwithstanding a greater detachment “in people’s approaches to nature,” “[o]ther more involved and emotive forms of thinking about nature have by no means disappeared” (229). Indeed, the individual “blend” of distance-engagement may vary, and even significantly deviate from social detachment, so that a generally high degree of detachment in a given society by no means excludes a deeply engaged individual relationship with nature and vice versa: “More involved forms of thinking, in short, continue to form an integral part of our experience of nature. But . . . they have become increasingly overlaid and counterbalanced by others which make higher demands on men’s faculty of looking at themselves as it were from outside . . .” (230). Here, Elias gives us a foretaste of what the varying, at times even paradoxical balances may be like; for instance, a greater involvement with nature may be found at the individual level in spite of an overwhelming detachment from it within larger social interrelations.

However, while it may well be that such detachment entails greater security and independence through a more knowledgeable and scientifically satisfactory idea of what nature is like, such security and independence come at a twofold cost. First, 

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20 Exactly how and why humankind was able to overcome its purely emotional reaction to nature remains an unanswered problem to Elias.

21 Elias gives the example of a sick person who, as an individual, is occupied with the question of guilt in connection with illness. When it comes to the individual’s interaction with the doctor this rather engaged position will not disappear, but will have superimposed on it the much more detached diagnosis that the illness is primarily the result of a biological course of events (Elias 230). Explaining the patient’s tendencies towards engagement and detachment on these differing levels in more abstract terms, Elias again envisions his model as a continuous scale of the polarities of changing social processes:

. . . this continuum of models would have one pole formed by the general models of units, such as congeries, agglomerations, heaps or multitudes, whose constituents are associated with each other temporarily in the loosest possible manner and may exist independently of each other without changing their characteristic properties. The other pole would be formed by general models of units such as open systems and processes which are highly self-regulating and autonomous, which consist of a hierarchy of interlocking part-systems and part-processes and whose constituents are interdependent to such an extent that they cannot be isolated from their unit without radical changes in their properties as well as in those of the unit itself. (243)
a more exact knowledge of nature comes at the cost of great emotional dissatisfaction (230). Secondly, social interrelations become such an impenetrable web of ever-growing interdependencies among an ever-growing number of people that the resulting pressures are felt as if they themselves were non-human, natural forces (231ff).²² I would therefore suggest that the opportunity to identify with Bierstadt’s Indian Spaziergänger provides relief from the impenetrable “tangle of interdependencies” and the resulting social “tensions and frictions” (Elias 232) on a personal-individual level at a time of increasing urbanization. In short, “playing Indian” serves to counter internal social pressures for the individual viewer, and demonstrates the paradox of his/her deeper emotive involvement with nature at a time of increasing detachment from it on the social level in nineteenth-century American life. While demonstrating and providing a more direct and affect-laden experience with nature on an individual level, then, on a social level “playing Indian” is itself contained within the complex forces of the capitalist marketplace bearing down on artists like Bierstadt.

Indeed, Bierstadt’s Indian back-view-figure with its familiar pose of the leisurely walker allows observers to participate in the depicted western scene as dressed-up natives and hence to experience a rare moment of emotive engagement with nature. As Frances K. Pohl explains, the practice of white men dressing up as Indians was not uncommon during the nineteenth century. While in western territories it was a survival strategy, “[f]or white men living in urban centers, dressing up as Indians was often a way to express symbolically a dissatisfaction with the material results of the government’s expansionist policies—the decimation of Native peoples and of the forests in which they lived—or with the very idea of

²² Elias paints a very graphic but disquieting picture of such a web of interdependencies in human relations:

It is as if first thousands, then millions, then more and more millions walked through this world their hands and feet chained together by invisible ties. No one is in charge. No one stands outside. Some want to go this, others that way. They fall upon each other and, vanquishing or defeated, still remain chained to each other. No one can regulate the movements of the whole unless a great part of them are able to understand, to see, as it were, from outside, the whole patterns they form together. And they are not able to visualize themselves as part of these larger patterns because, being hemmed in and moved uncomprehendingly hither and thither in ways which none of them intended, they cannot help being preoccupied with the urgent, narrow and parochial problems which each of them has to face. . . . They are too deeply involved to look at themselves from without. (232)
Progress itself” (149). And one may add, according to Elias’s thesis, dissatisfaction with the growing social constraints at work within an American society in which nature increasingly became a phenomenon and force “out there,” distinct from the increasingly urbanized life of Americans.

Bierstadt himself may be included in the group of those who, by “playing Indian,” signal a counter-stance to the increasing pressures and restraints of urban life for the individual. He led the life of the urban eastern middle and upper classes, and it was in his New York studio on Tenth Street that he painted Toward the Setting Sun three years after his first journey to the American West (Anderson, Merrill, and Skalka 28; Kornhauser 195-96). By providing individual viewers, with this painting, the opportunity to slip into native garb out in the Wild West, he was offering them a sense of temporary liberation not just from the social forces pressing down on urban dwellers back in the East, but from what may have appeared to easterners the overwhelming affective forces of raw nature. At the same time, viewers’ temporary liberation from social pressures merges with Bierstadt’s strategies for promoting and packaging his art, ones that would become as controversial as his art itself.

Bierstadt in fact was known to have his studio furnished with “Indian trophies” (Ferber 24), a practice he would later refine in the studio of his villa on the Hudson River.23 Here, surrounded by a large number of indigenous collectibles from his western trips, he hung his paintings in a theater-like studio, thus transforming his working space into a stage on which he presented his work as well as his persona (Ferber 36-39). Bierstadt was also known for having launched the so-called Indian Department at New York’s Metropolitan Fair in 1864, anticipating the later Wild West shows. Performing in front of an urban audience, his Native American dance troupe “helped to stimulate interest in his own painting” (Ferber 32). By “dressing up” his work in Native American garb, as it were, Bierstadt dealt with the market-driven side of the painterly profession, exploiting and profiting from the audience’s attraction to an “exotic Other.”

However, on the larger social level his efforts met with contrasting responses. On the one hand, his marketing was admired by those who attacked the double standard in the honoring of higher motives and sentiments, and disinterestedness in money-matters in the fine arts. On the other hand, Bierstadt was heavily attacked for his business-like approach to selling his art.24 The comments by his critics, as

24 William Cullen Bryant and Asher B. Durand explicitly denounced “the direct view to profit” and “gain” (qtd. in Ferber 32). However, their cautious phrasing reveals that what they
well as snide remarks in general about the materialistic aspects of the fine arts, demonstrate a considerable unease with the dark side of the capitalistic marketplace and its relentless impact upon American society and the individual—particularly its thinly-veiled aggressiveness, its speculative and fraudulent energies, its lack of authenticity and inner values. Clearly, Bierstadt’s strategy of “playing Indian,” his exploitation of an imaginary, transcultural Indianness, and the controversy surrounding such marketing on the social level share a pervasive sense of being at the mercy of powers beyond human control, powers that threaten to engulf the individual just as do natural, non-human powers. And yet Elias insists that neither these ever-expanding human-made forces nor the growing detachment of industrial societies from nature have precluded an intense human involvement with nature, especially at the individual level. Far from being rational or detached, the identification figure of the Indian Spaziergänger expresses both individual involvement with nature and an escape from the mounting social pressures within nineteenth-century American society.

We are confronted with similarly palpable social disquiet upon closer examination of Bierstadt’s The Oregon Trail. However, in this case it is especially important to note that the specific social and historical situatedness of an audience further determines its relative degrees of detachment and involvement. While its unfavorable reception by the American audience suggests that The Oregon Trail visualizes the rampant social pressures of the Gilded Age, to Europeans the painting conversely promises an escape from war-plagued societies and economic deprivation.

**Excess and/or Escape in The Oregon Trail**

In his introduction to Bierstadt’s life and works, Matthew Baigell prepares the reader for three different “artist” personas: (1) Bierstadt, the brilliant sketcher of “atmospheric conditions, animals, and landscapes”; (2) Bierstadt, the painter of “charming, intimate . . . vacation scenes, mountain parks, and genre subjects”; (3)
and Bierstadt, the best-known but often-bashed “orchestrator of mammoth paintings of western American scenery” (8). *The Oregon Trail* is, perhaps, one of the most famous canvases suggestive of Bierstadt’s third artistic persona, and is frequently cited as an icon of the American West rendered in the spirit of Manifest Destiny. Baigell’s interpretation may serve here as an exemplary present-day revisionist reading, according to which Bierstadt “sought the general flavor of the westward migration . . . rather than a specific anecdote about a single group of pioneers,” and “brilliantly captured the ideals of Manifest Destiny” (46).25 Baigell concludes that “this painting more effectively outlines the combination of religiosity, determination, expansionism, and self-righteousness of the concept than the more famous and falsely theatrical *Westward the Course of Empire Makes Its Way* (1861) by Emanuel Leutze” (46). I would argue, however, that in *The Oregon Trail* a false theatricality thoroughly replaces religiosity and undermines effectiveness, exactly because of the spirit of determination that the painting expresses. In other words, rather than picturing the dream of a successful national expansion from the Atlantic to the Pacific, the painting’s accumulation of detail, lack of synthesis, and excessive coloring make perfectly visible the inherently belligerent materialism of westward migration.

American art historian Edgar P. Richardson remarked that “[w]hen those big dramatic pictures do not come off, they are dreadful” (qtd. in Hendricks, *Bierstadt* 10). Richardson attributed this failure among other things to “Bierstadt’s lack of control over the hot, bright colors he sometimes used” (qtd. in Hendricks, *Bierstadt* 9). Already during the artist’s lifetime Jarves had criticized the “cold and glaring color” (qtd. in Hendricks, *Bierstadt* 144), even in Bierstadt’s successful landscapes. In *The Oregon Trail*, the bright pinks, reds, and oranges that suffuse both the skies and the landscape, including the plains and the mountains, are painful to the beholder, and Bierstadt’s attempt to remedy the overdone contrasts from the earlier 1867 version failed.

Likewise, the exaggerated, foreshortened central perspective, as well as the fact that the painter hopelessly overcrowds the foreground plane, has the painting

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25 In the catalogue for the 1991 exhibition entitled “The West As America,” Patricia Hills first writes in an almost admiring tone that “we feel the infusing warmth of the setting sun and are awed by the spectacular hues streaking across the sky to illuminate the sheer cliffs rising at the right,” only to conclude later: “But the sparkling touches of color accenting the common aspects of pioneer travel and the fattened cattle and sheep are what finally reveal Bierstadt as a master of persuasive imagery” that “brought to life for nineteenth-century viewers the westering experience” (122-23).
falling apart into two distinct landscapes: the caravan of settlers with its wagons and riders passing before the coulisse of the mountain range to the right, and the ominous, dark woods to the left. The two separate pieces are only held together by the glowing skies. Gone is the aesthetic ideal of a return to nature as expressed in *Toward the Setting Sun*, and instead the depicted landscape degenerates into *staffage*, a mere theatrical backdrop, that towers over a multitude of largely incoherent compositional elements. The herds of sheep and cows, the horses and riders, all appear to head in different directions. Their dispersal in various directions is not balanced in any way by the overall composition, and the large canvas aggravates rather than lessens the sense of concerted efforts gone wrong. Indeed, by 1869 Bierstadt’s infamous predilection for giant panoramas had come under steady attack in America. As early as 1858, *The Crayon* had criticized the scale of Bierstadt’s European landscapes: “The same ability on a smaller scale would be more roundly appreciated” (qtd. in Hendricks, *Bierstadt* 56). And by 1867 *The Tribune* faulted Bierstadt for being “under the delusion that the bigger the picture the finer it is” (qtd. in Hendricks, *Bierstadt* 164).26

In addition, by the time Bierstadt painted *The Oregon Trail* in 1869, he had become something of an “artist baron,” what with the numerous receptions at European courts and palaces during his two-year stay on the Continent from 1867 to 1869, a fact that did not ingratiate him with his more democratically-minded American contemporaries. At the same time, he had developed yet another artist-persona, one that specifically catered to his European audience. Contrary to the American critics, European reviewers considered the enormously large format of Bierstadt’s paintings not as being pretentious and boastful, but rather as being useful and suitable for “express[ing] a nature so gigantic” and “initiat[ing] us [Europeans] into a new nature, besides the merit of representing scenery whose character is unknown to us . . .” (qtd. in Hendricks, *Bierstadt* 184). While Bierstadt’s “gilded art” elicited considerable antagonism in the U.S., Europeans readily embraced the difference of his style, scale, motifs, and subjects, investing his paintings with their fantasies of America. What facilitates a viewer’s exotic fancies in *The Oregon Trail* is the emphasis on the material aspects, as well as the exaggerated coloring that hangs over the canvas like Hawthorne’s much-invoked illusive veil that should help the spectator enter into the sphere between art and illusion. In this context it is noteworthy that almost all of Bierstadt’s westward journeying parties, and particularly those that depict German emigrants, are cast

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26 For more debates concerning the size, execution, and (lack of) quality of Bierstadt’s panoramic landscapes in the 1860s, see Hendricks’s “The Domes” 27-29.
into exceedingly unnatural tints which belie the harsher realities of the westward migration of settlers and gold-diggers. Especially the latter’s dreams often came to naught, and indeed Bierstadt met some of them on their often inglorious returns to the eastern regions as he himself headed westward (Hendricks, *Bierstadt* 64-68).

Apparently the American audience already sensed the advent of the Gilded Age in *The Oregon Trail*, noting the shabbiness of the art’s gilding rather than its glamor, whereas in the Old World the theatrically-lit vision functioned as the perfect screen on which to project the dreams of a new and better world, one promising escape from the poverty-, conflict-, and war-ridden European societies. While such escapist projections confirm the artificial nature of *The Oregon Trail*, they simultaneously reflect a view of nature as being above all a refuge from social turmoil and disorder, and also as a material resource and therefore a means of socio-economic advancement on both the individual and social levels. In this relationship between humankind and nature, then, humans have nature firmly under control, and yet while society has turned into an overpowering force from which one wishes to escape, on an individual level the engagement with nature promises a meaningful life and material success. Although subject to similar social entanglements and feelings of detachment from nature, the American critics of the painting conversely expresses the desire to de-commodify and re-invest nature with higher, more intimate, more regional, and more diversified values, values which had temporarily been eclipsed by the events of the American Civil War and its aftermath at exactly the time Bierstadt’s landscapes were most successful, namely from 1862 to 1866.

**The Continuing Challenges of American Landscape Painting**

As my approach to *Toward the Setting Sun* and *The Oregon Trail* has demonstrated, to enlist Bierstadt’s western visions in either the overly-simplified expansionist propaganda of Manifest Destiny or the more recent revisionist rhetoric would be to miss the diverse frictions and multiple ramifications inherent in

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27 Nineteenth-century Europe witnessed a large number of military conflicts as well as the emergence of nation-states, in spite of the widespread anti-feudal revolutions which were followed by a reactionary backlash. The hopes of many European supporters of popular sovereignty, when Germany became unified under Prussia, were soon thwarted as Prussia developed into another hegemonic empire itself. Even during the Civil War years immigration to the U.S. dwindled but did not stop, especially not immigration to the western territories. Germans in particular continued to be attracted to immigrate to the U.S., the major push factors being failed political hopes, economic crises, the rise of a dominant merchant class, and the continuing military turmoil.
nineteenth-century American landscape painting. Seemingly concerned with the glories of American nature, both paintings eloquently testify to the overall increasing detachment of western societies from nature, as well as to the ever-growing inner social struggles in American and European societies. As Bierstadt’s adaptation of the European Spaziergänger in Toward the Setting Sun and the European reception of The Oregon Trail demonstrate, individual emotive involvement with nature continues to persist while nature becomes an alternative refuge to the growing complexities of both American and European societies in the second half of the nineteenth century. Contrary to revisionist readings of The Oregon Trail and its alleged overwhelming impact on its audiences, specific social responses have varied greatly. While to Americans Bierstadt’s style had already passed its zenith when the painting was produced, Europeans enthusiastically received the painting as a means to distance themselves from social crises and personal economic hardships.

However, the turmoil of the Civil War hardly left the American psyche unscathed. On the one hand, it seems to have fostered an ardently, or rather desperately, nationalistic American (landscape) art; on the other hand it marked the beginning of a shift from representations of nature as an expression of American

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28 Nathaniel Hawthorne’s glowing response to Emanuel Leutze’s explanation of his plans for his famous fresco Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way, during a visit to Washington D.C. in 1862, seems to confirm that these times of national crisis required an art that would provide a balm for a war-ravaged nation. Of course, those familiar with Hawthorne’s obsession with matters of human psychology and guilt will know that he hardly qualifies as an advocate of the teleological progress of human history, of westward expansion or Manifest Destiny. In fact, Hawthorne may have mainly thought it necessary to counterbalance the ubiquitous, disturbing signs of the war: the throngs of soldiers in the streets, the natural devastation the military had left behind, the technological “progress” that had led to “devilish” and “gigantic rat-traps” (58) for killing, and the ominous shipwrecks along the shore that signaled the crisis of the American state. At the same time Hawthorne thought that a country whose political origins in rebellion threatened its very core required such shared “historical associations” (49) as had been envisioned by Leutze. Clearly, to him the works of artists such as Leutze, and by implication also Bierstadt, constituted a means to uplift the spirit and to unify a violently divided nation.

However, as David C. Miller has convincingly argued, during crises of the American state including those of the Civil War era, shipwrecks were an almost obsessively used trope in American painting, including landscape painting. At this particular moment in time, Miller claims, the ancient symbol of the shipwreck as a political metaphor in both painting and literature entails a cyclical model of history that clearly questions, complicates, and undermines the notion of human progress, in particular the notion of America’s providential mission (189). Like Novak, Miller discerns strong formal and philosophical affinities between American landscapists, viz., those of the Luminist School, and the art of Caspar David Friedrich.
history to a more intimate landscape art, one which suggests the desire for a deeper involvement with nature and a turn away from violent social conflict and upheaval, as becomes apparent in *Toward the Setting Sun*. Fed by a variety of heterogeneous cultural forces, then, these contradictory developments continue to challenge our own perceptions of and presumptions about American landscape painting. Given that the nineteenth-century landscape paintings that we have come to understand as embodiments of westward expansion (e.g., *The Oregon Trail*) were artworks that were often highly controversial, short-lived, and interconnected with social processes, we need to be alert to the fact that there is much more “human” nature to nineteenth-century American landscape paintings than at first meets the spectator’s eye.

**Works Cited**


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**About the Author**

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