

# SIMON ROBERTS

## **The Complicity of Landscape: Imagining the English Landscape as a Postcolonial Ruin**

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(extract from wider paper)

Abstract: The article confronts the image of the English landscape, as presented by the German writer W.G. Sebald in the novel *The Rings of Saturn*, with contemporary works of photography (by Simon Roberts and Ingrid Pollard) and literature (by Adam Thorpe) that provide a parallel critique of the English landscape, whose traditional pastoral imagery conceals its actual complicity in economic and cultural exploitation. The analysis focuses on the notion of the Picturesque, its significance for the formation of the English landscape, and its role for contemporary visual and literary practices that seek to confront the Romantic tradition of looking at landscape with the post-Holocaust and postcolonial practices of witnessing.

p.2 “The work of Simon Roberts further emphasises this ethical more than aesthetic shift: his photographs, much like those in Sebald’s novel, adhere in their formal composition to the rules of the Picturesque, defined by William Gilpin in the eighteenth century, yet their “appropriation” of its visual language is made to articulate a different message and question the ethical implications of a nostalgic appreciation of landscape in our time and age.”

p.9 “in Simon Roberts’ portraits of contemporary English people’s engagement with landscape, titled *We English* (2007-2008), landscape as the locus of national identity and cultural heritage is revealed as problematic on many levels. Roberts focuses on traditional, national habits, which have been seen as typically English, such as hunting, sports, and tourism. His images avoid easy criticism, yet emphasise the highly instrumental treatment of landscape by its present occupants. Heberdens Farm, Finchdean, Hampshire, 20th December 2007 [fig. 3], for instance, presents a hunting scene in a composition that is very familiar from a long tradition of English landscape

painting. The picture plane is divided allowing the sky to cover more than half of its surface. The scene seems just another repetition of a well-known hunting theme. However, with small but significant details, such as the dim, unsaturated colours, and slight lack of sharpness in the upper parts due to movements of hunted birds, Roberts achieves the effect of discrepancy between the familiarity of the scene imposed by its affinity with traditional hunting representations, and its contemporary setting.

This discrepancy is even more distinct in another photograph from the series, Ratcliffe-on-Soar Power Station, Nottinghamshire, 16th June 2008 [fig. 4], which features a golf course with players engaged in their activity, towered by enormous structures of a neighbouring power station. In this scene, composed according to the rules of the Picturesque, elements typical of the genre are supplanted by their contemporary equivalents: transmission towers instead of solitary trees, massive chimneys instead of mountains or hills, and golf players, staring into the distance to assess the trajectory of the ball, instead of prospect-admiring travellers. This photograph is deeply unsettling in the way that it follows the convention of traditional landscape depiction and yet contains almost nothing that is not artificial and man-made. The history of the aesthetic ideal of the Picturesque—understood as the way of looking at the landscape and the direct consequence of this practice, that is, the landscape park with its ambition to make nature “picture-like”—shows that artificiality was at its very heart from the very beginning. What Roberts’ photographs effectively convey is how the nostalgic longing for the past, so powerfully evoked by the Picturesque and its depiction of ruins, turned in present-day reality into a prospective longing for “the present as future ruin”.



*Heberdens Farm, Finchdean, Hampshire, 20th December 2007 [fig. 3]*



*Ratcliffe-on-Soar Power Station, Nottinghamshire, 16th June 2008 [fig. 4]*