

OBSERVATION POINTS

The Visual Poetics of National Parks



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1. BEING HERE, LOOKING THERE

Mediating Vistas in the National Parks of the Contemporary American West

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IN *LANDSCAPE AND POWER*, W. J. T. Mitchell argues that understanding landscape means thinking of landscape as “a dynamic medium,” “not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed.”¹ For Mitchell, “A medium is more than the materials of which it is composed”; it is “a material *social practice*, a set of skills, habits, techniques, tools, codes, and conventions.”² Therefore, to analyze landscape as a medium is to “trace the process by which landscape effaces its own readability and naturalizes itself,” that is, the process by which landscape hides the practices that shape it, the process by which landscape presents and represents itself “as if it were simply given and inevitable,” and the process by which landscape “makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as a sight and site.” In short, analyzing landscape as a medium asks “not just what landscape ‘is’ or ‘means’ but what it does, how it works as a cultural practice.”³

Mitchell says that all landscapes obscure the mediations that constitute them, but I would argue that landscapes that are defined and experienced as “natural” landscapes, such as those in the national parks of the contemporary American West, are even more powerfully naturalized. Like other places, national parks are “implicated within complex networks by which ‘hosts, guests, buildings, objects and machines’ are contingently brought together to produce certain performances in certain places at certain times.”⁴ A national park is not a fixed, static object waiting to be witnessed by a visitor with an equally

fixed, static identity, but parks and visitors are not totally unformed either. Studying the built environment of a landscape—the material infrastructure that enacts and enables those contingent convergences—must make sense of indeterminacy but also wrestle with the objects that exist there. This is true of both the technologies that display landscape and the landscape framed as a visual object. Both appear to be already complete objects “out there” in front of a visitor encountering them, but are more accurately characterized as intersubjective, dialogic, spatio-temporal “third spaces” that are always already “real-and-imagined,” subject-and-object, and actor-and-acted-upon.⁵ What is more, each encounter with and in landscape is shaped by the cultural history of previous encounters, particularly those that get fed back into the visual culture of place, but this history does not predetermine the outcome of any landscape encounter.⁶ In this context, practice is the key bridge between objects and bodies.⁷ Tim Cresswell argues that bodies and places “only operate through constant and reiterative practice”: every day, people encounter buildings they did not build, buildings for which they “had no say in their material existence.” As Cresswell says, “In a very banal but important way they are the structures that, like it or not, we have to practice in and around. We can use them very creatively but within limits unless we are predisposed to walk through walls or plant bombs.”⁸

The national parks interpellate visitors who want to have an embodied experience of something they may have only experienced in other mediations. The parks are designed to deliver unmediated experiences through a different, less visible medium: a park’s built environment, which rhetorically promises, enacts, and enables immediacy while mediating on a more subtle, embodied level. The most deeply sedimented forms of naturalized and naturalizing rhetoric in the national parks are manifested in display technologies like visitor center installations and scenic overlooks, which present themselves as if their function, meaning, purpose, and process are materially self-evident. Within them, there may or may not be overt rhetorical appeals, but the material form is a silent instructor that manifests those more overt appeals while also working at a different level—at the level of the body, where things may be felt and responded to without necessarily being verbalized or visualized (Figure 1.1).



Figure 1.1. Zabriskie Point, Death Valley National Park, California.

The main purpose of this chapter is to show how the naturalized and naturalizing visual rhetoric of the national parks is always already rooted in both the material display technologies and material social practices that mediate every park experience. Roads, road signs, boundary signs, visitor center displays, scenic overlook structures, and trails in national parks are not simply the *means* for experiencing the national parks, but the *medium* through which the national parks present themselves as natural landscapes.⁹

Beginning with the boundary signs made of “indigenous” stone and wood that identify the border crossing and extending to signs pointing to some things and not to others, National Park Service (NPS) technologies of display function as *difference machines*: as material techniques that show landscape as a set of self-contained, unique vistas that are different from the tourists’ home spaces, different from vistas in other national parks, and different from other vistas within the local park itself (Figure 1.2).¹⁰ This differentiating function is echoed not only in the built environment of the parks but also throughout NPS communications and in the National Park System itself, where the separate

units of the park system must be connected enough to appear to be in the same system in order to give them all an identity as parks in relation to other spaces, but also must be internally differentiated from one another to have their own identity. And, as scholars such as David Louter and Peter Peters have shown, the standardization and differentiation function of the parks has become increasingly embedded within a presumption of automobility, where cars not only deliver visitors to mediated landscapes but also mediate their experience once there.¹¹ From slow, winding roads and the forty-five-miles-per-hour speed limit, which give a certain pace as well as a sequence to the experience of landscape as a “scenic narrative,” to the design and choice of paving material for a hiking trail, the built environment of a national park functions as both means and medium.¹² Certainly, as scholars such as David Tschida have shown, NPS publications and guidebooks can be powerful rhetorical sites that mediate visitor experiences in important ways as well, but my main concern here is for the physical sites where that interaction occurs once visitors are in the parks.¹³ There, objects in the built environment enact and rep-

Figure 1.2. Windows Trail, Arches National Park, Utah.

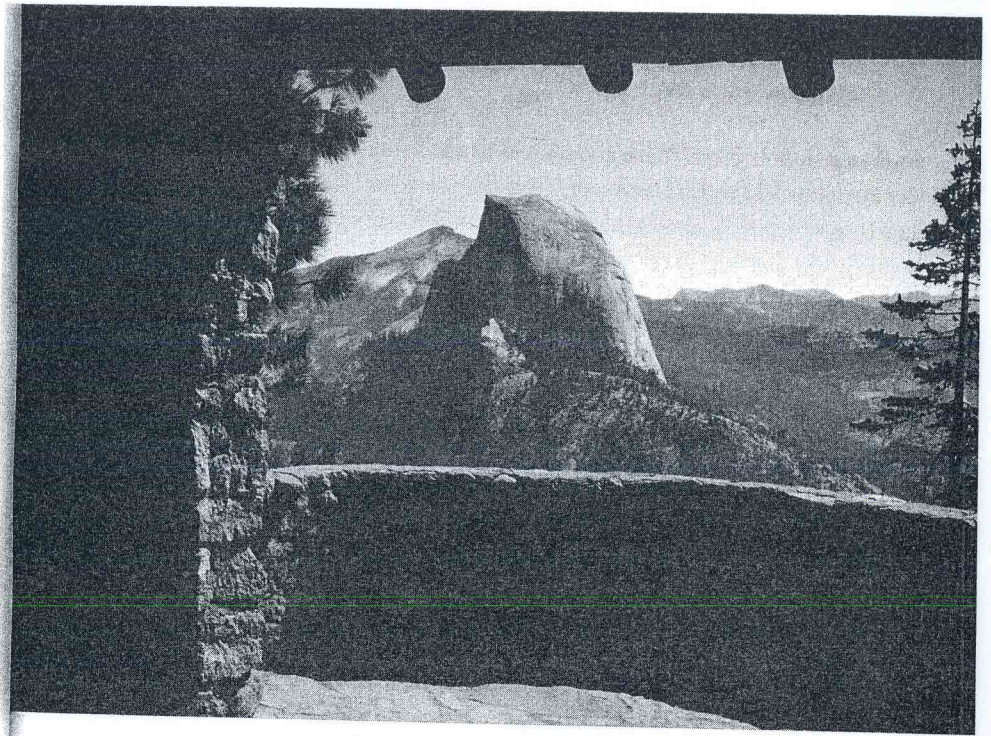
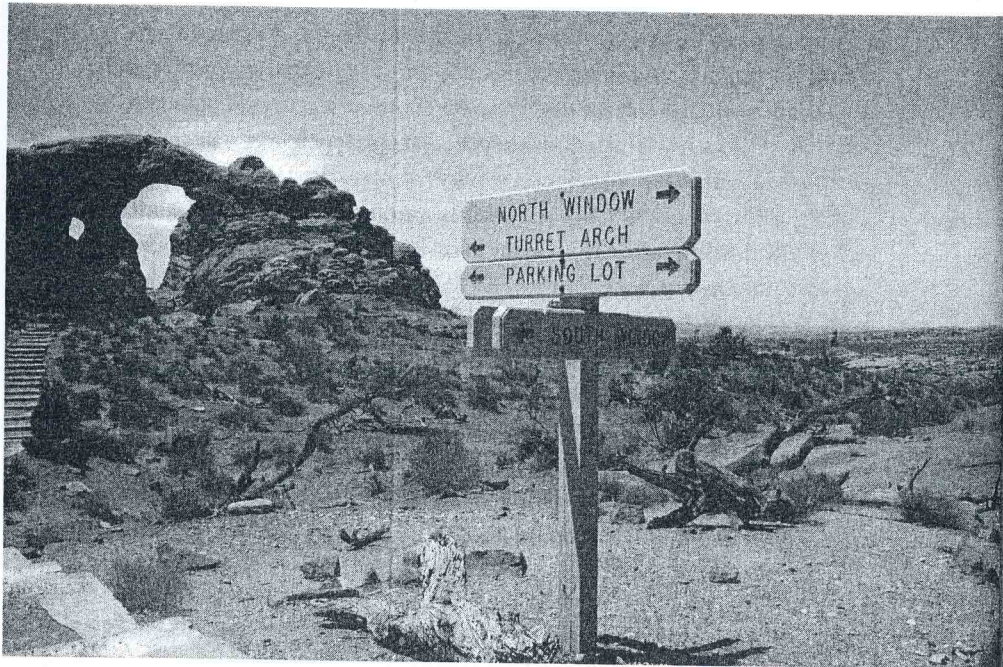


Figure 1.3. Half Dome Overlook, Yosemite National Park, California.

resent the “skills, habits, techniques, tools, codes, and conventions” that make national park landscapes function as “material social practices.” They are also the primary mechanisms by which a national park “effaces its own readability and naturalizes itself” *and* interpellates visitors who come to witness them as natural sights and sites (Figure 1.3).

Both technologies and practices position eyes that see and photograph within bodies that inhabit and negotiate spaces in particular ways, so my work engages material as well as visual dimensions of the spaces and practices of tourism in the national parks. A visual/material approach to the cultural study of tourism, landscape, and photography involves analysis of the visual and material dimensions not only of the representational objects landscape tourism produces (photographs, postcards, guidebooks, maps, advertising, etc.), but also the practices within which these objects are produced, distributed, and consumed as well as the built environment that mediates both the material objects and practices and the people who are tied up with all these objects

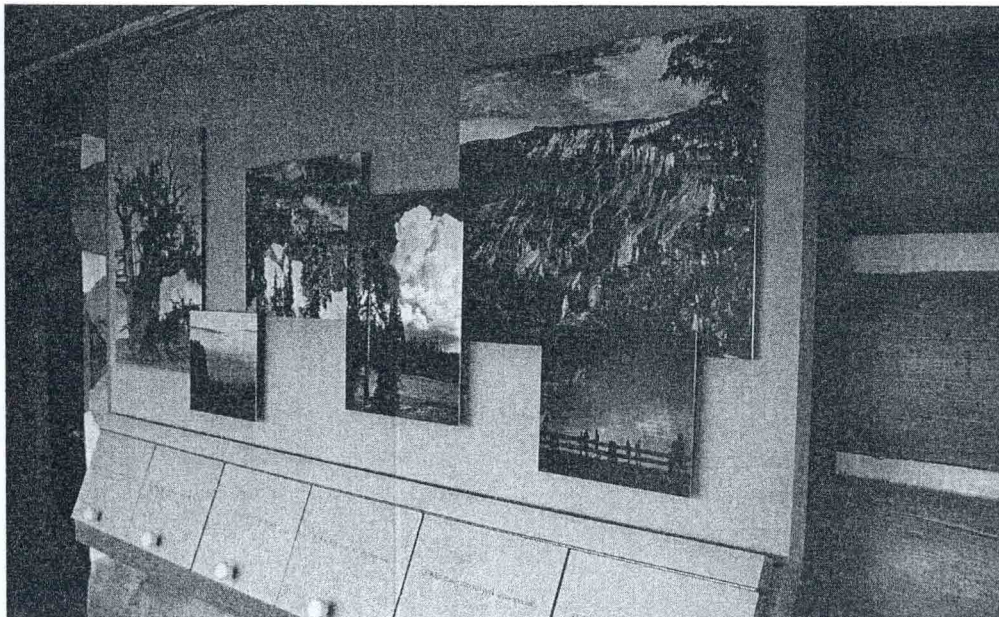
and practices.¹⁴ Here, I am most focused on mediating practices and on elements of the built environment that function as on-site tourist landscape media in themselves: visitor center displays, telescopes, and scenic overlooks.¹⁵

Inhabiting Display Technologies and Practices in the National Parks

On a wall in the log cabin-style Point Supreme Visitor Center at Cedar Breaks National Monument hangs an interactive installation (Figure 1.4). The top part is a montage of six photographs of different scales and alignments that partially overlap each other. Below this montage is a set of six hinged panels of uniform size and alignment. From a distance, the panels appear to be captions for the pictures, but closer to them, it becomes clear that the panels are part of an interactive Q&A display: each panel features a question and a handle at the bottom, and behind each panel is another panel printed with an answer.

As a visual, linguistic, and material technology of display, the installation is an example of what Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen

Figure 1.4. Point Supreme Visitor Center, Cedar Breaks National Monument, Utah.



call a “multimodal” text: a culturally embedded communication form made up of different symbolic elements from different paradigms of meaning, whose overall function, use, and meaning are produced and consumed at the intersection of linguistic, visual, and material modes of communication.¹⁶ While the Q&A installation presumes acts of looking and reading (literally as well as figuratively), it also presumes a more embodied relationship with it as a material signifying object. Indeed, the written text itself is only a small part of a complexly structured rhetorical display of knowledge whose “message” is carried not only by the words printed on the panels but also by the visual and material form of the statement as it is embedded in the larger installation. The linguistic elements are the most obvious in their attempt to educate and persuade an audience, but each mode communicates something “by itself” *and* in relation to the other modes, making for an “excessive” cultural form that is not reducible to the sum of its parts. In this way, analyzing the installation will provide a useful starting point for a more general analysis of embodied visualities in the tourist spaces of the national parks. For analytical purposes, I will separate out the three main modes—linguistic, visual, and material—before bringing them back together to theorize their interactive complexity.

The installation features six question-and-answer panels. Alongside finite, place-specific questions that presume finite answers—such as “Why is this area called Cedar Breaks?” and “How deep is Cedar Breaks?” and “How high above sea level are you?”—is an open-ended question: “What makes national park areas special?” Lifting the hinged door reveals the answer: “National park areas are set aside to preserve nationally significant resources of natural, historical, cultural, and scientific interest. The National Park Service has the difficult mission of conserving and protecting these features, yet still providing for their use by visitors.”

The question “What makes national park areas special?” is misleadingly simple. It asks for readers to identify one thing that makes the parks special. Most important, the question presumes that the reader already agrees that national park areas *are* “special.” By interpellating an audience that already believes that the parks are special, the question is already working to align readers with its implicit value system. The question is formulated as if it has a definite answer that can be

“known,” can be formulated as *the* answer to the question, and then can be revealed behind the panel, but clearly there are multiple possible answers to this question and many possible places from which to answer the question. Is there one thing that makes them special? Special to whom? Special in relation to what? In this regard, it is interesting to imagine how readers might answer the question in their minds before lifting the panel, and how they might converge on or diverge from the one revealed on the panel.

This process of aligning readers with an objectified subjectivity and constraining possible interpretations of the installation is continued even more explicitly in the text written on the answer panel. The first sentence, “National park areas are set aside to preserve nationally significant resources of natural, historical, cultural, and scientific interest,” addresses the question of what constitutes a “special” area. It seems to be a flat statement of fact, but it, too, closes down a number of questions it raises. The key terms here seem to be *preserve*, *nationally significant*, *resources*, *interest*, and *set aside*. Why and how are they preserved? In what condition? For what purpose? By whom? What constitutes a “nationally significant” area? What does it do to a river, a tree, a mountain, a bear, or a building to be named a “resource”? To whom, why, when, and how are these areas “of interest”?

By including the phrase “are set aside to preserve” the “resources,” the statement addresses a subtle dimension of the question: the issue of *making* contained in the question about what *makes* the areas special. In this case, it is not just an objective essence of a thing that *has* interest that qualifies it for designation as a national park area, but also the act of setting it aside itself. A national park area not only *is* special, it is *designated as* special, and what makes that happen is the act of setting it aside, placing it elsewhere, beyond the realm of everyday environments as well as everyday meanings. This is especially apparent in the U.S. national parks, and particularly in the large-scale landscape- and wildlife-oriented “nature” national parks of the American West. Since Yellowstone was established in 1872, the western national parks have played the role of the Other of culture, an elsewhere where many people visit but where no one “lives.” The underlying principle behind this symbolism is that the “natural” national parks are “special” because they are different from and (more importantly) *should be* maintained in

contrast to culture, to “artificial” modern and now postmodern urban America. Of course, because national parks are managed and experienced within larger discourses of place-making and meaning-making, the parks do not sustain that separation. Likewise, the visitors themselves bring their culture with them as well, so the interrelation between similarity and difference in tourist spaces is always complex. As Chris Rojek argues, “Tourism is not a break or escape from everyday life. Rather, it provides a plane of cultural difference in which everyday life routines are contrasted and developed.”¹⁷

The Cedar Breaks visitor center panel’s statement could have ended with the first sentence and been an adequate answer to the question, but it continues, moving away from describing the places that are special and moving toward articulating more directly what it means to the NPS to *manage* these “special” areas: “The National Park Service has the difficult mission of conserving and protecting these features, yet still providing for their use by visitors.” This sentence defines the NPS’s job in terms of an apparent conflict. I say “apparent” because using the phrase “yet still” conjoins the two parts of the sentence into a contradiction that also interpellates a reader who believes that these two acts—conserving/protecting and providing for use—are presumed otherwise to be mutually exclusive functions. But the statement takes it one step further, defining the mission of the NPS not only as anomalous but also “difficult.” It clearly articulates its mission as a conflict, as a tension, as at best a “difficult” balancing act between what it presents as binary opposites: protecting for versus providing for, or protecting for and from, presenting to while protecting from.¹⁸ This tension between “presenting to” while “protecting from” is present in all national parks, whether they are presenting/protecting landscape, wildlife, artifacts, “nationally significant” buildings, or preserved ruins.¹⁹ It is also the same difficult balance that public museums must negotiate in their interface with the public. But just as museums that encourage people to “look but not touch” must do so with linguistic, visual, and material means and media, NPS display technologies present landscape as a visual object while disciplining bodies in spaces.²⁰ Those bodies must be organized to be able to make the parks available for temporary but not permanent inhabitation. The distinctive nature of the inhabitation demands a dialectic of connection and disconnection: come on in and

make yourself at home, but keep moving; you may visit as often as you like, but you may not stay. As explicitly and exclusively tourist landscapes, they define the relationship to what is seen and experienced as an always temporary phenomenon.²¹

While the words used in the panels are important, the medium through which they are encountered and “read” is as well. The question about what makes national park areas special both speaks from and against the rest of the installation. This particular panel comes near the end of the installation (presuming a left-to-right reading orientation), meaning that if readers had interacted with the other panels before this one and had gotten definite answers to definite questions, then the partiality of this question would be effectively masked. In this context, the question just to the left of the “special” panel—“How high above sea level are you?”—starts to look like a transition. Like the other four questions, the question about altitude sets up the question to have only one objectively true answer (10,350 feet/3,155 meters, as it says), but it also does so by using a direct mode of address, asking “you” if “you” know how high above sea level “you” are, instead of asking a question more abstracted from the subjectivity of the visitor, such as “How high above sea level is Cedar Breaks?” Opening the panel reveals “the” answer to what has now become “your” question.

The fact of the landscape’s altitude is presented as if it is known but not necessarily known (yet) by “you.” In asking “you” to locate yourself in relation to an objectified abstraction (feet above sea level), the question functions as a metonym of the rhetoric of display operating in the national parks in general. Recall Mitchell’s point about landscape and interpellation: landscape presents and represents itself “as if it were simply given and inevitable” and “makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as a sight and site.” Completing the process here means using the technology the way it was designed to be used, which itself means inhabiting the subject position presented to “you.” “Your” job is to situate yourself in relation to the generalized designs, to make the parks, as well as the NPS discourse *about* the parks, “your” own.

In this context, it is important that the structure of the interactive elements of the Cedar Breaks installation presumes that the NPS imagines and addresses a visitor that wants/needs to be instructed, a

visitor who does not know these things and therefore must be taught them. But instead of simply *telling* the visitor the information, the display presents the information in the form of a *sequential experience* for the visitor: first, reading the question; second, deciding consciously or not to follow the structure to the answer; third, imagining the answer before and while, fourth, reading the answer, which completes the process and the text. The space of narrative is focused “between” and “after” the two panels, in the imaginative act of predicting the answer as well as the reconciling act of either accepting or rejecting the answer as an appropriate answer to the question.

This sequential experience takes the form of a potential narrative waiting for particular visitors encountering it to bring it into existence through “the medium of bodily action.”²² And because it is a narrative that cannot be performed without physical interaction *at* the site, it may provide another metonymic representation of the larger NPS interpretive project, which clearly seems drawn to “experiential,” instructional display practices in its approach to one-way scenic loop roads, trails, and even visitor center slide shows. With the altitude panel and the “special” parks panel, the imagined visitor is interpellated by words represented and presented in a certain visual/material object that demands a certain kind of embodied, sequential process of questioning, wondering, and then “knowing” that unfolds over time and through physical interaction within a particular space. Therefore, physically interacting with the panels materially represents *and* enacts the process of witnessing the NPS revealing the parks to visitors. The NPS presumes to know “us,” presumes that it knows what we know and what knowledge we “want” (in terms of both desire *and* lack).²³ The NPS knows the answers and invites visitors to learn the answers from them by offering them structures of display that are presumed to communicate their function automatically, and where even the most open-ended questions have predetermined definite answers that the visitor must be guided toward so that they can make them their own. This reinforces the more deeply naturalized rhetorical frame materialized by the parks: that the only way to know the parks is to see them for yourself, which entails looking at them while you are physically embodied in them, moving through them, engaging them, touching them, *being* in them.

To appreciate the distinctiveness of this structure and its encoded process, it may help to imagine the process occurring through a different medium. Imagine learning the answer to the question about altitude from reading it on a map, reading it in a brochure, or reading it on the placard on top of the wall at the Point Supreme scenic overlook instead. All of these modes would rely on a visitor either having pre-existing interest in the question or being somewhat randomly exposed to the answer. A more fully embodied interaction, where a park ranger personally asked “you” to guess “your” altitude, is unlikely to occur, but even if it did, it would unfold in a differently constrained interpersonal encounter, not a predetermined media structure that fully constrains the question, the answer, and the process of finding out the answer, treating visitors “as if” they themselves are also already known. Such displays position visitors in relation to both the objects *of* display and the objects *on* display. “You” are offered only one choice: enter the epistemological process as it is designed for you or keep moving.

Just as the Q&A format of the installation frames the written text in a certain way, producing a mode of interaction that communicates independently of the specific words and sentences used, the composition of the separate photographs into a text materializes and displays other extralinguistic “messages.” But where the reading process with the panels is structurally linear, unfolding *temporally* in a predetermined sequence, the individual photographs, the collage of photographs, and the relationship between the photographs and the panels within the context of the whole installation are structured *spatially* (with this next to that or far from that, connected to this/that, disconnected from this/that instead of before/after this/that).

The photographs represent different objects: a weathered bristlecone pine tree, a cliffside sunset, a snowscape, a high mountain meadow ringed with tall conifer trees, a lightning strike foregrounded by the fence of the Point Supreme Overlook (which itself is just up the path from the visitor center where this installation is located), and the iconic view of the Cedar Breaks rock formation that is presented by that scenic overlook. There is no written text telling us what connects these images together or what separates them. Given their placement in a visitor center in the middle of Cedar Breaks National Monument, it makes sense to presume that the photographs represent different aspects of Cedar

Breaks, but such a reading is entirely context specific, derived from being in that space, seeing those pictures organized that way.

Considered as a single text, the photographs take the form of a collage. The photographs are set up in an irregular pattern and overlap each other. None of the photographs has a frame around it. All of the photographs are visually striking but naturalistically composed without obvious stylistic signatures that might call attention to their constructedness as photographs, which makes the elements of nature appear to be always already objectively beautiful—*naturally* well composed, vividly colored or contrasted, lush, monumental. But whatever else is communicated by the individual photographs through their internal composition, signification, and aesthetics, the collage structure itself shows something through its material and spatial form: that there are specific things to encounter in Cedar Breaks, and these things are separate but related. These different things are “naturally” self-contained objects or scenes that can be witnessed in the park. More important, these are scenes that can be captured in photographs—if not by “you,” then at least by a professional photographer. Composed together into the collage, the photographs represent the identity of the place by showing the separate but connected and overlapping aspects it contains. These are the things that together give Cedar Breaks its identity, the things that make Cedar Breaks itself.

Like the Q&A structure, the collage presents itself as an incomplete text: a collection of objects, words, and/or pictures waiting for a visitor to incorporate them into their experience. However, while both components of the installation presume an embodied interaction with it to “complete” the text, they do not display any explicit instructional information about *how* to interact with the installation. There are no didactic verbal or iconic visual directions for how to use it; it simply sits there waiting for someone to come up to it and enter its material system of organization, and thus its sense world. The material form of the installation as a whole represents and enacts its own mediation: national parks are places where the NPS displays objects, words, and visions to visitors, who have come there to make them their own by temporarily inhabiting them. The whole process is presented as if it is natural for landscape to be presented as an object to be witnessed, natural for visitors to want to interact with the landscape as if it is “given,” and natural to employ “in-avoidable” and self-evident modes of interaction as well.

Thus, while the content and the Q&A format of the hinged panels presume and address users who need to be instructed, the overall installation does not. Instead, the installation addresses visitors as if they already know how to use the installation. Instructions for use then become the taken-for-granted, commonsense thing that “everyone knows,” an absent presence rendered all the more central to the functioning of the installation because it is not brought to the surface of the discursive engagement between the people who produce the parks and those who consume them. Its instructions are entirely implicit, presented as though they are already known, presented as though they already make sense, presented as though there is no question about their function and meaning, presented as if everything is materially self-evident. In a word, they are presented as though they are *natural*.

Materializing Telephoto Aesthetics: Being Here, Looking There

A good way to understand the absent presences that are naturalized in national park display technologies is to compare the absence of instructions in the Cedar Breaks installation and scenic overlooks in general to an example of a national park display technology that *does* contain explicit instructions for use. At scenic overlooks on both the South Rim and the North Rim of the Grand Canyon (as well as at many other parks throughout the United States), telescopes have instructions for “Camera Fans” embossed into their side panels (Figure 1.5). The text on the telescope is in all capital letters and composed with no punctuation, only line breaks:

CAMERA FANS
THIS IS A QUALITY
TELESCOPE AND IS EQUAL
TO A 1750MM TELEPHOTO
LENSE
INSTRUCTIONS
FOCUS TELESCOPE TO
YOUR EYE PLACE CAMERA
UP TO EYEPIECE AND
TAKE PICTURE

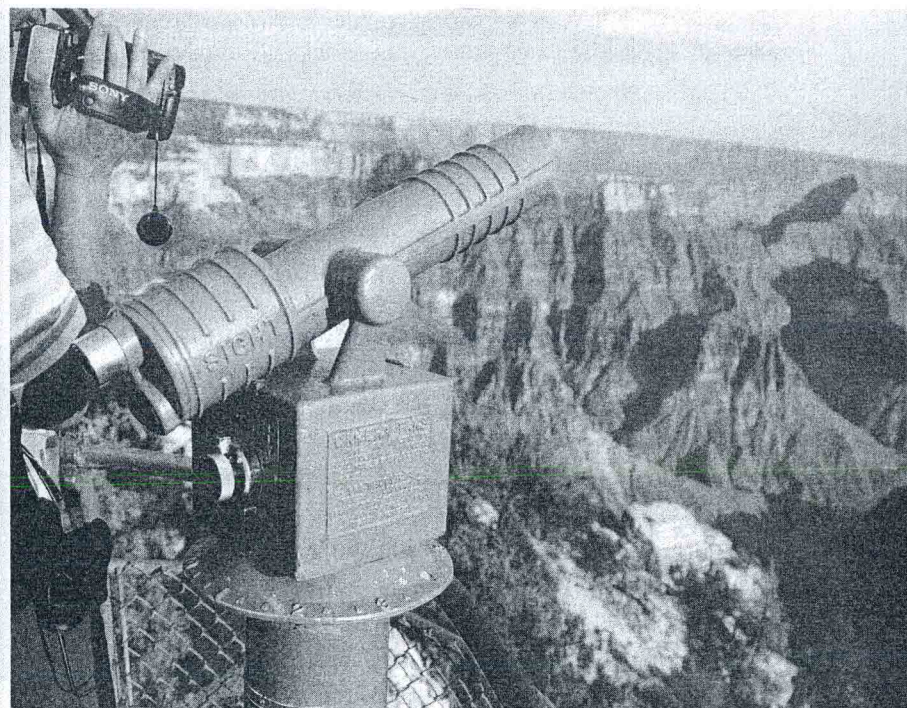


Figure 1.5. North Rim, Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona.

The text includes not only information about what the object is (including its technical specifications), but exactly how to use it and in what sequence. Thus, the instructions interpellate a visitor who does not know what to do with the technology and thus must be explicitly instructed. More important for the context of my analysis, though, is the fact that while the message does not take it for granted that visitors will know how to take a picture through the telescope, it does presume that potential users are “Camera Fans,” who not only know how to use their cameras but also have come to the overlook to take pictures. The specific technologies for seeing and photographing may be problematic, but the fact that an overlook is made to be seen and photographed from is not. The telescope is presented as something that will help visitors do something that they came to do, only better.

