

WHY NIGHT?

Hélène Valance –Landscape painting was very important in the United States, especially in the 19th century. It had an ideological function: it helped Americans build their identity. It showed the American continent, with an exceptionally rich nature, or sunsets over the Grand Canyon, gigantic paintings that acted as a response to French historical painting – you think for instance of Jacques-Louis David's large formats. Americans did the same, but instead of history and time, they painted nature and space.

At the end of the 19th century, American painters continued to paint landscapes, but they did something different, oddly, almost all of them painted night landscapes, nocturnes. There are two explanations for this: first, an American painter expatriated in Europe became successful there around the early 1890s, and suddenly this painter, named James McNeill Whistler, became a model for American painters. Whistler, when living in London, painted a series of paintings he called *Nocturnes* in reference to Chopin's music. He depicted the industrialized banks of the Thames, seen through obscurity and mist. Here the urban, industrial landscape is distanced, veiled by the magic of night. In 1890, the French government bought one of Whistler's paintings, which immediately made him famous in the US, and encourage American painters to do the same thing. This is the first explanation: there was an important artistic figure whom painters in the US wanted to imitate.

The second explanation comes from a wider background; it really comes from cultural history. In 1890, night as people had known it for ages was beginning to disappear. People realized, with the development of electricity, obscurity was no longer what it used to be, and would never be the same again. Night landscapes were received with enthusiasm, because they allowed to see the landscape which was changing at the time – the wild West was over, replaced by great cities, railroads, industries – night allowed to see all these changes through the filter of obscurity, to distance modern elements that were difficult to accept. It allowed to create a landscape that was easier to see and to accept for Americans at the time. In a way, this is an anti-modern, reactionary painting. But I am convinced night eased the transition from the lost horizons of the West to this new landscape, which would become the new definition of the American landscape, the urban landscape. So this leads to a much more innovative, modernist painting, tending towards abstraction or cubism for instance. So here, night is a way to reject modernity, but paradoxically also to adapt to it as well.

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