

Western Style

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And God said let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night: and let them be for signs...

German Bible of Martin Luther

The extent to which we respond to color is simply a matter of how skillfully and purposefully color is projected at us.

Advertising Agency Magazine

My movie would end in sunstroke.

Robert Smithson

WESTERN STYLE

The known knowns.

It appears that both in the visual arts and in politics, the perennial theme of the West is again in ascent. That art would imitate and seek to entertain a subject as romantic as the West is not surprising. And that politics cloaks itself in the aura of this same cloth is proof positive that we still live in a pagan nation of fetishists and witch doctors. But that art and the nation are in thrall of this place does not begin to shed light on just how powerful the West has become. For today, without any firm definition or even a true geographical location, the West has become the world's biggest cult — exported to every corner of the globe, and arguably the brand behind most brands, the West is a kind of premium super distilled capitalist id.

If this psychoanalytical analogy is to be taken at face value, the West must be seen from the outset as existing both in reality and in an unconscious place. And indeed this contradiction between a location and something more subtle, if not entirely devoid of specificity, is what is most compelling about the West and why, for example, it is such a powerful influence in contemporary politics and popular culture. In other words, the West has become a kind of perpetually changing shape-shifter and media goblin — a character capable of adopting endless influences and attributes while simultaneously consolidating and (re)marketing its owns identity. The archetypal shape-shifter, familiar to both aboriginal and science fictional stories, is a subject that is especially relevant to any discussion of contemporary art as well as the chimera of politics. Why? Because in both fields there is a strong emphasis on constructing a dream and then selling its constituent parts (a kind of paranormal niche branding) where the story line functions like a psychosocial chop-shop, as such the West functions as both an ideology and marketplace. In art, the West is a catalog of styles and in politics, it is a promise of honor. In both, it is as empty as the desert is dry and irresistibly sexy.

This highly complex weaving of desire and apotheosis, of market and marketing, is what I am here calling western style. It is the almost impossibly complex cultural interzone that has since the beginning of recorded history created myths to excite our desire(s) and orient our

anxieties. How these myths are perpetuated is of particular interest when discussing the West because, as I will discuss at length, it is the means by which the myth is trafficked that has become the sign of the thing itself. The West therefore has become a mirror of its motivations — the shape shifting Terminator capable of adopting any form. What Debord called our society of spectacle has eclipsed the earlier orientation of a Christian heaven and redirected our focus away from the soul to the material pursuit and the game of identity makeover. The eternal horizon has become an endless one.

Packaged like the Holy Grail, the West has become not a destination as such but a lifestyle embedded in the materials and images of our capitalist society. This is why politics and artists both use it as a backdrop and cluster around its myths, because it has become our most virile totem, accessible to average people and universally pungent — the West is not only the worlds biggest cult, it may be its last, usurping even God by embracing the final heterodoxy of self-fulfillment — endless horizontality. It has done this by appealing to the universal desire for the new, for every person who proclaims a vision or utters a desire there is a mirror to refract that image and project it back into this self-reflexive horizon. This is the fantasy and the curse of the great shape shifter, our western style democracy, capitalism, and latter day paradise, our western style market.

To chart this horizon we will troll the history of the West and review how images evolved from icon to entertainment. In this essay I hope to show how gradually the archaic symbols of cosmology became the primary medium of our image culture and then subsequently became the symbols themselves. Nowhere is this more clear than with color, and my thesis is that the language of reproduction, especially the print technology that deluges our every waking hour with glossy imagery, can be distilled back to a basic worship of the sun. And this pagan wonder at bright light, which has caused so many to travel so far, has been split into the CMYK color separation process used today to create every color in your catalog and computer screen. In other words, the images by which we live and aspire, themselves made up of millions of tiny dots of color, are nothing more than a spectral lust for cosmic origin that dates back to our ancestral worship of the skies. And this lust, far from receding in our increasingly secular and virtual world, has morphed to become the central focus of our lives, a new hyper cult that worships the shifting gradients as readily as our ancestors pondered the moon and stars.

For most Americans, the West is most easily defined as a region, some measure from the Mississippi and divided by the Rockies. It is an attitude, a politic, a history and for many a lifestyle. Captured in innumerable popular cultural mediums from music to the ubiquitous

Hollywood Westerns, and from cuisine to fashion, and holding a kind of unshakable prominence in the nation’s self–identity and narrative chronicles, the West is the archetypical American myth. It is first and foremost a place of symbolic heroism, of cowboys and Indians fighting and rugged adventurers blazing trails. But just as importantly it is a place of discovery, of sublime geological vistas and material riches. And, of course, it is a place of mystery, the site of more UFO sightings than anywhere else on earth and the infamous location of Trinity, where the U.S. government ushered in the atomic age.

And for all intents and purposes the West as a geographical location is a sufficient definition. The natural history of the place does determine a great deal about its appeal — from fresh air to glimmering hills — and its history has shaped American and its evolution as a nation. But even a cursory glance at art history and modern politics (both globally and nationally) suggests that there is a more important definition than this John Wayne legacy, and one with much more far reaching influence.

That the romance of the Western United States has its genesis in a much bigger and more universal myth should come as no surprise. From the European explorers who first set out to “discover” the New World, to the generations who fled there for a chance to reinvent themselves, the West has consistently been portrayed as a quasi-divine place. And it is this allure to dreamers across the ages and around the world, where the West is more properly located, and why it continues to be greater than the sum of its parts. It is this embodied though unmoored concept of a manifest destiny — that proverbial ideal promoted in the gung-ho Wild West American expansion of the 1800s and studied by every American schoolchild today — that continues to evoke the deeper, more mysterious, and troublesome fantasies of untouched wilderness and sublime revelation. It is this manifestation of desire that concerns us here — a longing that exceeds far beyond America and seems hardwired into the story of human civilization, a craving for and perpetual march towards cosmic origin.

Far from being a definable period or even place, the West has always functioned more broadly as a kind of heuristic vehicle of transcendent identity. A potential in place and time, a broad swath of utopia seemingly inexhaustible and beyond the definitions of any people or age. It has operated like its own cosmological map and psycho-social schematic, orienting everyone from Plato and Lao Tzu to Hernan Cortes and Buckminster Fuller, and been every bit as pervasive and vital as any of the monotheistic traditions.

And this comparison to religion is a vital point and place of departure, as the West has evolved

in tandem with the advent of all major cosmological and later scientific systems, serving as a kind of collective unconscious well of desire. The West is in this definition synonymous with not only the Garden of Eden, but more broadly and fundamentally it functions as a kind of default projection of total desire. Far from a simple craving for more wealth and land (ala colonialism) or of religious return (ala the Puritans), it encompasses complex fantasies of extraterrestrial apotheosis and self-realization.

And it is this psychological landscape that we have come to regard as America’s manifest destiny. This destiny, when allowed to migrate from the specifics of American history, reveals itself to be a fantastical yearning for revelation and divine intervention that speaks not only to powerful degrees of imagination and delusion, but to a seemingly universal belief in the supernatural (of the existence of extra perception and dimensions in the guise of metaphysical nature). The West is the promised land.

The West as Mirage: (The Shaman in the Wood Beckons Us)

The parallel between the paranormal and swashbuckling western style buccaneerism is alive and well in the branding of the 2008 Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Trafficking heavily in a regional myth of heroic character, Palin was cast as a latter day visionary who, like John the Baptist, had emerged from the wilderness to promote a new cosmic and no-nonsense truth. While sometimes coded in outdoorsy analogies (moose hunter) Palin’s deeper narrative was of a decidedly more religious nature, patently calculated to appeal to conservative Republicans but in keeping with a much older tradition that likens the wilderness with paradise, and paradise with divine truth.

Widely reported on during the campaign was her membership in an evangelical church and the various occasions when her pastor evoked the “end of days prophecies” of the Book of Revelation while suggesting that the relatively virgin landscape of Alaska would serve as a refuge during Christ’s triumphant, and bloody, second coming. Indeed, the notion of a judgment day, located not only on the calendar but in your neck of the woods is part and parcel of a long tradition in American politics of evoking Armageddon. This judgment, generally located in a generic western style place (desert/ mountain/ rural), without necessarily referring to a specific cardinal point, was in keeping with the Christian myth of a chosen land, a pure land. And of course this tradition has a longstanding precedent in Europe prior to its arrival in the new world. In fact, it is the one of the central basis for the settlement of North American by Puritan settlers who were looking for their own version of a new Jerusalem. What is clear

today as it was in the 1500s is that untouched nature is a potent symbol of divine immanence and is a prerequisite for the transformative events that will lead to revelation. As such, the wild is synonymous with the West — and figures prominently in its brand, whether extolled by politicians or artists — as the most radical source for inspiration and cultural credibility.

But what is equally true is that in addition to a blank slate, the West requires an interlocutor, a shaman, and a salesman. Palin in her new public role was just channeling many of the themes and spinning many of the tall tales that have been utilized to promote the West since Christopher Columbus first approached the Queen of Spain. The Portuguese navigator understood that the Crown wanted not only wealth and glory, but it wanted authenticity, a more direct link to God (not to mention political power). For these explorers, the seas to the West embodied not just an ocean route to India and the spice trades but something more profound: the prospect of discovering or building a new heaven on earth. From the Seven Cities of Cibola to the Fountain of Youth to El Dorado, the possibility of new lands offered fantastical opportunities to harness God's will. And what would become the American Dream was itself the currency of these earlier European powers, the promise of staking a claim.

Believing utterly in heaven, Europe, like many other countries in Asia and the Middle East, located their afterlife and celestial origin in a solar environment — somewhat ironically located here on earth. All of these sun worshipers trafficked in the promise of magical transformation through metaphysical movement — a kind of alchemical tourism, where the allegory of Eden promised a new paradise, just over the horizon.

One clear example of this travel narrative is the countless early maps drawn in Europe, the Middle East and Asia that illustrate what were then undiscovered lands. They're almost inevitably filled with poignant allusions to a celestial place (again ironic given the map is a guide to earthly travel) inhabited, depending on their audience, by angels, cavorting nymphs, or monsters. And the maps, did and do suggest treasure trails and runic prophecy as much as directions to a new marketplace or trading partner. They are illustrated maps not of any place but of the dreamscapes projected by these explorers — and they function in some ways as a kind of spiritual erotica. A dream that today is still being printed and sold in countless maps and travelogues; the pin-ups and glossy picture magazines, the gadgets and bridal wares, the sitcoms and adventure flicks, and yes, the evangelical pulp, all share with these early maps a certain promise, a certain spectral potentiality that I think is synonymous with the West. What links them is printing and the way our eye greedily drinks in the cross-hatching and dithered marks of promise on the page.

And this is the point, that the West is synonymous with the world's oldest and most profoundly successful image culture and that this culture is devoted to the eternal retelling of man's search for paradise. And what is more, that the technologies of capturing this paradise, for illustrating this search, parallel the symbolic systems of artists and mystics and later reflect the advent of science and the industries of travel, printing and image reproduction. In other words, the countless stories of man's search for celestial origin have all utilized an image that mimics what today we call the West. The proverbial X on the map in this case surely does mark the spot where the West started its ascent as worldwide cult.

The Secret of Paradise: Gold, God, and Glory

The search for paradise has been a focused pursuit of all of recorded human history. Indeed, the records of that history are largely devoted to stories and symbols related to the search. From Greek temple fragments to a myriad of art objects and codices, the search for Eden seems inextricable from a search for the origin of life. And that origin it seems, before the advent of empirical research and birth of science, is almost if not always rooted in a conception of a celestial garden — the root of all metaphysics. The function of the garden is paramount to understanding the way the West has evolved to become such a powerful force in contemporary culture. Why? In large part because the garden represents our greatest desires: wealth/ glory and our greatest fear: death. By simultaneously confronting both of these materials concerns, it single-handedly orients life and ensures its meaning.

How was the garden able to so successfully captivate the imagination of Christian Europe for two thousand years? The answer is both simple and profound, through light and color. There is no better place to see this and to begin the journey into the celestial realm of the West than with the sun, which has its own storied status as cult object.

Since prehistory the sun has been a source of awe and power and just as reliably, any medium that manifests or mimics light has been worshipped and valued above any other. This is most evident in early cultures in the way rituals were performed on solar cycles and in the way certain materials such as gold and gems were held to embody the sacred. Of course gold and jewels quickly embodied more than just the metaphysical powers of the divine, they became something far more basic and desirable, they became value. The transition of light from purely a sacred fetish to a commodity unleashed the first great surge of market based economic expansion and set the stage for the West's ascent as cult headquarters. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the violent intersection of the Aztec and Christian cultures.

Returning conquistadors, telling of cities made of gold, put Europe in a frenzy and set the stage for a clash of values that has arguably never ended, as the West became and remains the de facto location of get rich quick schemes and the cult of discovery (now redubbed celebrity). Not that gold relinquished its ability to capture the sublime, but it did conflate the sacred and the profane in ways that have impacted every historical event since.

Christianity was successful in the conversion of Europe in part because of its ability to subsume older cults. This is nowhere better symbolized than in the Christ figure himself who through his resurrection co-opted the central drama of many earlier agrarian cultures such as Osiris in Egyptian mythology. Frazier notes time and time again in *The Golden Bough* that the later monotheistic religions all incorporate aspects of earlier ritual systems, not least of which were their sun worshipping forebears. This focus on the sun is due in large part to its obvious life giving attributes but more symbolically, the sun becomes a kind of profound origin, as close to a visual godhead as any human has ever seen.

Given this importance, it is no mystery why later Christian churches would use the radiance of the sun to illustrate the divinity of their resurrected god. In addition to capturing the sun in their interior sanctuaries they pioneered the use of iconic art to communicate the vision of the resurrected Christ. Christianity also continued the tradition of using gold and other precious materials to capture and communicate the spiritual power of Jesus. Indeed, the talismanic effigies and icons that are such a vital part of most Christian traditions through the Reformation are a study in how gems, gold and silver, and other color rich semi-precious stones were used to capture and communicate the power of the sun. This relationship between the sacred and geology is another vital strand in the Western parable and one I will discuss later in the essay when I look at contemporary art.

While it was much later that Isaac Newton successfully decoded the physics of light, and the relationship between light (the sun) and color was properly understood, religions had for thousands of years used these colorful materials because they could capture and reflect color in ways that were very special. This was first utilized in the halos applied in gold leaf to small votive paintings and in glass mosaics and would reach its apotheosis in the baroque sculpture of Bernini's "Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" and the wall sized stained glass of Chartres and other Medieval Cathedrals.

But while color was used to elicit awe and proclaim the glory of heaven, it was just as often the subject of suspicion and rejection. This tension and seeming contradiction is the backdrop

for the often schizophrenic history of the West and why today the color is coded, packaged and sold as exotic.

David Bachelor makes this point in his book *Chromophobia* showing how Western cultures since the time of Plato have characterized color as dangerous and corrupting. This fear, Bachelor argues, is usually manifested in color being characterized as a circumspect other: oriental, feminine, gay or primitive or as superficial. "Color is the corruption of culture," Bachelor writes noting that our own era of modernism has been the most successful in excising decadent display of chroma. That the West has historically feared color is one of the great contradictions of its history. Why is it that the same symbolism and formal language used to illustrate and promote the highest ideals — things like heaven — are also very often the same things that are spurned and counted as corrupting and sinful?

This contradiction is of course woven throughout history; the basis for considerable tragedy, it seems this conflict mirrors a contradiction in contemporary culture between the transcendent and the banal, the high and low. Today, like in many eras in the past, there is a sublimated relationship between our ecstatic and empirical natures. But just the same, there is a strange and I think perennial undercurrent of extreme almost pathological desire for color. This desire is what makes color such a profoundly important subject to explore vis a vis the West. For color is all over the West, haunting the dreams of the conquistadors and the basis for Hollywood's Technicolor takeover of popular culture.

What Batchelor points to as the single most important event in the West's relationship to color is the Christian story of the fall. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden sets the stage for the great narrative of the West — that is, the great historical search for and attempt to return to paradise. That the fall is characterized not least by its rejection of the body — forming the basis of sin and the moralizing history of man's relationship to the material world and nature — is the backdrop for our fear of color. It is also why the West continues to be the location of forbidden desire, as it tempts us back to the scene of the crime. Since Christianity, in keeping with its mythic predecessors, only has nature as a palette to evoke heaven, color, the original taboo, becomes ironically our most sacrosanct and desirable medium. Is it any wonder that advertisers have driven the development of color reproduction and that pornography was one of the first subject matters to utilize color printing, not to mention multimedia distribution from the VCR to the Internet!

It is an important contradiction that presents itself immediately in the Bible that the place of

paradise houses within it the seeds of corruption. Whether or not you wish to imagine the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil as a ruby red apple, it is clear that it is hanging deliciously low on some abundant and fertile plant that must have been, like so many other wondrous things in any garden, colorful. And this being the case, it was color that both constituted paradise while simultaneously prompting its ruin.

It is this tension inherent in our perception of color – that is both wonderful and also suspect, that continued to paint a broad and very influential swath through all subsequent religious culture — a culture that more than anything traffics in a heightened desire for something that is profoundly elusive. In short, the fall is the first rather effective example of advertising, wherein the customer (always you and I) is presented with a product to fill a void that exists (the expulsion from paradise) without ever actually satisfying that void. In this way the Christian myth of the garden is a highly effective fantasy that is always just out of reach, scarcity of means being the basis for the number one rule of capitalism: supply and demand.

What is especially compelling is the way the search for the new world coincided with the already established garden myth to create a new and improved fascination with discovering magical lands and projecting desire onto geographical place. For Columbus and many of his peers the search for a water route to India also included the promise of finding even more exotic locations such as the Seven Cities of Cibola. These magical cities functioned in much the same way as Jerusalem had done for the crusaders, linking a mythological need with material concerns in a rather unholy trinity of gold, gold, and glory. ³

The myth of the Seven Cities of Cibola like that of the Fountain of Youth and El Dorado all rely on a central belief in a lost city or paradise. Cibola also shares elements of the Jerusalem myth because it was held to contain a religious item(s) of great power (such as the Spear of Christ)⁴ While this was a specific reference, magical powers are often given to these fictional places — certainly Ponce de Leon’s search for a fountain of youth fits this description. The storyline of the Seven Cities of Cibola recounts that when the Moors conquered Christian Spain, seven bishops fled the city not only to save their lives but also to prevent the Muslims from obtaining sacred religious relics. Fleeing west, they established a new city across the Atlantic Ocean that over time was described as being made of gold.

A city of gold is strikingly the very same story as that of El Dorado, which is perhaps the most famous myth of Western paradise to come out of the New World. El Dorado serves as an important benchmark in the legacy of our contemporary image of the West since it

conflated the exoticism and spiritual prowess of the Native American populations with stories of untapped wealth. It is the fantasy that the indigenous populations were somehow not human that allowed not only for their exploitation, but also for the flights of fantasy about cities built from precious metals. Of course this same projection led to more baroque fantasies of extraterrestrials — a subject that continues to play out in the interpretation of such mysterious sites as Machu Picchu and the Nazca Lines, not to mention the conspiracy theories of alien abduction across the Southwest. Indeed, the recurring theme of aliens is yet another vital strand in the definition of the West.

The reports of untold riches has its source not only in the legitimate troves of gold and silver held by the Aztecs and other groups first encountered by European settlers. Sightings of El Dorado were also due to the unusual geological formations and mineral based colors encountered throughout the New World, especially the West. Descriptions of alien landscapes peppered the testimonies of soldiers and missionaries who traveled through these foreign lands and led to waves of immigration, each with a new tale to tell.

The means of telling these tales is what I will focus on next, as I try and show how image culture and the advent of print technologies helped both to form and focus the myth of the West.

Picturing the West: Paradise as Pin-up

As we have seen, the myth of the West was always promoted heavily through imagery and color. From early maps of the New World to sun worship, the cult of paradise was based on controlling certain formal medium. This ability to manufacture, and in some ways mimic nature through oil painting or precious metals serves as the backdrop for the quantum leap of image culture: the invention of photography in the mid 1800s.

When fixing an image on glass became viable enough for photographers to take their equipment into the field, many were drawn to accompany teams of explorers to exotic locals. One perfect example of this intersection between photography and the romance of the West is the life and work of William Henry Jackson. In 1869 Jackson, who was also a painter, was hired by the Union Pacific Railroad to document the scenery along their route for promotional purposes. This was to be the first in a long line of incredible commissions to capture the West for the curious and hungry markets of the East and Europe. His most famous work began in 1871 when he accompanied the U.S. government survey (the predecessor of U.S.G.S.) exploring

what is now the area around Yellowstone. Capturing terrain that was still widely held as fictional to a majority of American's, Jackson's pictures were the first to reproduce images of the geysers and to introduce a wider audience to the grandeur and sheer size of the West.

These images were met with incredible excitement as the West took on even more mythical proportions as a landscape filled with surreal geology as well as exotic plants and animals. Following on the heels of the Civil War, many Americans began traveling West to make their fame and fortune and Jackson's images, reproduced in newspapers and shown in wildly popular exhibitions, no doubt played a key role. Indeed, Jackson was an instrumental player not only in the popularization of the West, but also in advancing printing in America, helping to publish in the early 1900s the first cheap and widely distributed color pictures. These images, published by the Detroit Photographic Company using the photochrom process were the first color images widely available to a consumer market and portended the massive print runs of popular magazines (a list that includes a title for every habit and fantasy: from Playboy to People) that occurred after World War II. 5

This new industry of cheap images was inspired not only by their technological novelty but clearly also because the subject matter was so popular. Before the depression, at the height of their success, the Detroit Photographic Company had stores in New York, Los Angeles, London, and Zurich and published an estimated seven million prints a year. In addition to photographs, they also began to promote photographic copies of works of art, which along with the sublime landscapes of the West, were popular as inexpensive home decoration. In a comparatively short period of time, these photographs gave birth to a whole new industry of Western Style, selling everything from Indian knick-knacks to the dream of space travel. In some very basic way, these color photos set the stage for the multimedia global capitalism that today so effortlessly streams imagery into every corner of our lives. It is no coincidence that this phenomenon began with pictures of the new Eden — the West.

The use of photography by Jackson and others to capture and promote a new interest in nature was not only due to the exoticism of the Western United States and its many geological wonders. It also must be seen as a continuation of the scientific revolution occurring alongside the advent of photography and in turn the ongoing cosmological inquiry of the day. Indeed, the excitement about geology and geysers mirrored a worldwide interest that had both Christian iconography and Darwin to thank as scientists and artists both clamored to redefine the metaphysical origin of the universe in nature.

In order to fully understand how photography both gave rise to and in some ways mirrored these paradigm shifting observations, they must be seen in light of some of the other historic events that took place around it and in some cases accelerated its development. The systematic development and increasingly sophisticated technologies for seeing and capturing nature that personified science in the 18th and 19th centuries did not eliminate mystery but only multiplied it. Indeed, Isaac Newton's ground breaking *Optiks* serves a perfect example of this phenomenon as light was seen to be not a divine phenomenon but a myriad of constituent physical elements (later discovered to be waves). This understanding of natural phenomena consisting of a a logical armature or order would ultimately lead to the discovery of the cell, particle physics, and genetics. These subjects, and many other equally important scientific discoveries had a huge impact on artists and philosophers leading many to begin developing new systems that perpetuated a search for the garden in more psychological and biological terrain.

These new worlds visible with the microscope led to a brand new set of visual vocabulary that would eventually lead to a greater interest in abstraction. And while many of these images were new, many, it turned out, were rooted in our collective unconscious. Images as basic, and as powerful, as Newton's prism induced rainbow mirrored and in some ways celebrated the colorful role of the garden as a metaphysical subject, as did the many crystalline shapes and cellular matrix found in everything from stones to flesh. Everything it seemed was made up a fantastic microscopic architecture that artists wanted to depict. As such, it is was the technologies of viewing and manufacturing these new frontiers that formed the parameters of the avant-garde cults of Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, Vorticism, Futurism and ultimately Modernism, Pop and contemporary art. In every one of these historical periods, the technologies of seeing what cannot otherwise be seen by the naked eye are paramount and come to be operative techniques - or surrogates – for the original mystery — Eden.

These artistic movements gave rise to brand new ways of seeing that emphasized not only light, such as in Impressionism, but also more radically on capturing smaller and more minute constituent parts of nature. These parts can be broken into two complementary categories: patterns and light. By the mid 1800s along with the burgeoning science of observation, many artists were learning how to paint with light. This new approach to color was based on Newton and later scientists such as Ogden Rood who wrote a manual (well known by Seurat and others) that explained how color could be created by using small dots of different primaries that would, at a proper distance, blend to form the whole family of colors. This desire to create brighter and truer colors had of course concerned artists since the Renaissance but it wasn't until Rood and others such as Hermann von Helmholtz and James Clerk Maxwell created detailed color wheels and methods of mixing colors that color become the science it is today. 6

Maxwell is perhaps the most important figure in this intersection between science art and image making since he was the first to promote the idea of subtractive printing based on three primaries. In short, Maxwell observed that if three equally spaced points on the spectrum are chosen, they could be combined to create all other colors. Cyan, Magenta, and Yellow are the three chosen subtractive primaries (K which means black is added only because the amount of ink needed to create a true black out of the CYM is prohibitively large for good printing). While he could not prove it at the time, Maxwell's CYMK process was later shown to be accurate based on how the mind interprets color and that human vision has peak sensitivity to red, green and blue (these colors form the alternate set of primaries RGB called additive that are used to project color such as in TVs and computer monitors). Today the CYMK process is what dominates the color printing industry and by extension the far more chromophilic palette of contemporary art.

After color, the second most important discovery related to science and image making was patterns. Patterns of course have always been observed in nature and in some very profound ways repeated patterns, such as in ornament, have decorated and given order to art since the Greeks. And since the invention of even basic printing methods such as etching, various techniques of simplifying lines to communicate volume had been in use. But the observation that hidden to the eye all things in nature displayed patterns not only inspired artists, but also in some ways became the template for new printing processes such as the duotone and halftone which modulated the size of patterned ink applied to the page to create the subtle shades of the image. These processes of printing are by far the most common ones used today in all image creation, including, digital imagery which is broken down into similar patterns of pixels. This process of deconstructing the image through the technology of its creation is strikingly similar to what science was discovering through empirical observation about the material world.

Championed by scientists such as the early geologist Charles Lyell and the botanist Matthias Scheiden who along with Theodor Schwann discovered that all tissue is made up of cells, this deconstructive science can be seen in all the aforementioned art models as well as avant-garde spiritualism such as Theosophy which profoundly shaped the early avant-garde. Coupled with Darwinism, Theosophy, and by proxy Constructivism, the Bauhaus, and Suprematism promoted a hybrid system that heavily emphasized color and abstract geometries to illustrate the psycho-spiritual potential of individuals to evolve. This schematic system, championed so forcefully by people like Kandinsky, sought to integrate the science of color with Darwinism and latent Eastern ideals of enlightenment in a system which if followed could produce a kind

of spiritual evolution. Naive perhaps, but a compelling synthesis of religion and science and the basis for our current new age cults of self-realization.

In this way, the enigma of nature was replaced by a more ordered system of building blocks and theories. These discoveries, and the incredible imagery that they produced, allowed a popular audience for the first time to see things invisible to the naked eye. These life forms reduced to formal shapes were clearly an inspiration for early abstract artists such as Hans Arp and Joan Miro and would later reappear in the writing and earthworks of Robert Smithson and others. Smithson writes, "What are the lattices and grids of pure abstraction, if not renderings and representations of a reduced order of nature."⁷ And in addition to artists, writers too were inspired by the hidden germs discovered by Pasteur, giving rise to brand new literary genres that, when grafted onto the more traditional stories of monsters and devils, gave rise to science fiction and all of the many permutations of Hollywood apocalypse we see today. This bridge between abstraction and science fiction is I believe, an operative frame with which to view contemporary art's most compelling artists.

Not only did this emphasis on observing nature lead, since Giotto, to increasingly realistic renderings of nature through color and form, but also ultimately to a far more radical embrace of abstraction and ultimately a profound intersection of metaphysical ideas with empirical science. This intersection, defined by materialism and fetish, has given us the garden as pin-up, a kind of pornographic rendering of nature post apocalypse, as defined by fetishized metamorphose and baroque hybridity.

It is this hybridity that has allowed for the explosion of artistic vocabularies and imagery that define contemporary society. And it is this metamorphic landscape that has given rise to the image of the West as a backdrop to the end of world as we know it.

The West as Metamorphosis: Sunny Death Cult

In geology metamorphic rock is the result of the transformation of an existing rock type, in a process called metamorphism, which means simply a change in form. A process that occurs under intense heat and pressure metamorphic rocks that are visible on the surface of the earth are some of the most important types of geological formations for the study and analysis of the age and creation of the planet. Rocks as we have seen, are part of a historic vocabulary of fantastic and metaphysical dreamscapes that depict heaven and denote cosmic origin. One of the most important disciplines of science since the 1800s has been geology,

which, amongst many other important discoveries, has determined the true age of the earth. It must be remembered that throughout history there was strong debate (and continues to be in some quarters) about the date of earth’s creation and the discovery and meaning of fossils was a subject often of violent disagreement.

Fossils represented not only a record of prehistoric life but more profoundly, a visual palimpsest of time. The ability to read time in the landscape became a kind of obsession for artists and philosophers and the thirst for discovery was quickly applied to archeology and other more scientific methods of treasure hunting. These disciplines, like those of the other sciences, employed a process of observation—in this case one based on digging through the superficial layers (strata) to reveal lost civilizations. What is of interest to our exploration of the West is the many fantasies that arose out of this newfound fascination with the subterranean earth and the bones of the past. But of course this fascination was not so new, as fetishism of old objects and relics had been around since prehistory and certainly the cult of Christianity had promoted this as a vital part of its rituals and cosmology.

Indeed, I think one of the most compelling intersections of art, science, and religion is the fantasy of a lost evolutionary link or sacred point of origin that will reveal the mystery of the universe. The West is a particularly fertile location for this manifestation and today, no less than in the past; it is filled with the language and images of this fantasy. The basis of this contemporary Western style apotheosis, just as it has been throughout the Common Era, is the fantasy of eternal life, the original leitmotif of the Garden of Eden.

It is this quest for eternal life that has motivated all the desert religions, from Zoroastrianism to Mormonism and can be seen repeatedly in death cults such as Jonestown and the Branch Davidians. The ardent and apocalyptic belief held by David Koresh and others was that they represented a second coming and as such it may be construed that the desert of the West was construed to mimic the original biblical lands of Judea.⁸

Though it would be wrong to oversimplify and draw too many comparisons between the literally hundreds of messianic groups that have chosen the West as preordained location for their movements, it is uncanny just how many do in fact gravitate to the hills. Uncanny but not surprising, as it seems clear that narcissism is a prominent player in all these groups and that they identify themselves as the second coming of Christ would seem to dictate that they follow in his footsteps, i.e., go into the desert.

This exodus is not limited to groups preaching biblical cosmologies but also includes many New Age groups, artists and witnesses to extraterrestrial contact. Again it is less the literal location of their movements that interests me but the symbolism that inspires and orients their world views—a vocabulary that hews strikingly close to the Garden of Revelation paradigm. In this way, the landscape as backdrop can be seen again as a kind of uber image, that establishes a deeply held context for these dramas. What is interesting is the obvious tension between these groups being “new” or authentic and the common often cliché image they have of their destiny. One of the ways the West has become an empty sign is its emphasis again and again on these common themes.

The fixation on death as a Western style conflagration can be seen in the work of many post war artists in America from Mark Rothko to Andy Warhol but to my mind the most compelling and influential artist to address the West and its apocalyptic hold on our imagination is Robert Smithson. With Smithson the whole history of Eden, from Osiris to Joseph Smith is revealed not so much as a quest for paradise, but as an inevitable manifestation of entropy. In particular, Smithson “nonsites” seems to presage the evolution of the West from a specific albeit fantastical location to something undetermined but still trafficking in the same symbolism of geological origin and paranormal orientation. In particular, his use of mirrors seems somehow to suggest the metamorphosis of the land from something real to that of a reflected image, a process that underscores my idea of the West as a dislocated and ephemeral projection of desire.

What is striking about Smithson’s “nonsites” and interest in entropy is that they both reframe the question of time as without end. In this way Smithson seems to hint at the same endless horizon that has come to define the postmodern West. For Smithson, the fascination with entropy can be seen as a kind of conceptual geologist’s spin on the apocalyptic visions of the West’s many death cults where eternity is privileged more than the present. He writes “Many would like to forget time altogether because it conceals the “death principle” (every authentic artist knows this). Floating in this temporal river are the remains of art history, yet the “present” cannot support the cultures of Europe, or even the archaic or primitive civilizations; it must instead explore the pre- and post-historic mind; it must go into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts”⁹

What is clear is that the West, because of its naked geology and desert plateaus, evokes a hybrid fantasy born of the first desert religions and new fantasies of science and technology. In both, the idea that the stones hold some kind of sacred key that can be revealed is of

paramount importance. This mating of the primitive and future is familiar to anyone interested in science fiction which has, since the early 1900s, been trafficking in a hybrid narrative one part religious adventurer one part scientist and one part doomsday prophet. Perhaps nowhere is this genre better illustrated than in the Planet of the Apes franchise, which proposed a kind of inverted evolution taking place in the distant future.

One lesser known artist and writer who embodies this intersection of science fiction and land art and predates Smithson's fascination with geology is Richard Sharpe Shaver. Shaver is best known as the author of a series of stories published in "Amazing Stories Magazine" which describe an ancient race of monsters who live underground and prey on humans. While Shaver's ideas were met with skepticism (he claimed they were true whereas most sci-fi writers would never make this claim) what is of interest is the way he transliterated his belief in ancient alien cavern dwelling life forms into art. Sometime around 1959 Shaver began collecting and photographing rocks. Taken in extreme close-up, Shaver claimed to see images and hidden communications from ancient alien people. By slicing the rocks and polishing the revealed surfaces Shaver thought he saw a pictorial history of earth in the crystal patterns of the stone.

The interpretation of stones, like the desert pilgrimage, is a process of interlocution between past and future and whether Shaver was insane or not, he very poignantly proposed themes that have defined the West for thousands of years. By documenting and distributing images of the land as a kind of extraterrestrial text, along with his written stories, Shaver seems to have understood the most complex relationships between fantasy, psychology, and multimedia. When one looks at the preponderance of contemporary art that alludes to these same themes and vocabularies of the West as a metamorphic landscape, Shaver is in many ways a lost prophet.¹⁰

The preponderance of contemporary artwork that violently juxtaposes disparate mediums and materials especially including ancient materials with newer man made technologies (rocks and mirrors) suggests again and again a renewed interest in the garden as meta-site. Where the "non sites" of Smithson crashes into the geometric plasticity of Judd you see the template for a good deal of contemporary art. What is clear is that in this work there is a logic of growth, what Smithson so often referred to as crystallography, where the cells and grid like forms of our modernity begin to mimic and mirror the microscopic patterns of nature. When ready-made objects are added to this template of cosmic armature there is the repeated evocation of fall-out, a fascinating word choice for the allegory of an apocalyptic garden .

And this template of the garden, overlaid onto the neon and glitter and sex and saturation of the Western style market is synonymous with contemporary art which seems fixated on images of disaster, of crashing and splintering and exploding as the only composition capable of rendering evolution in real time. What could be more emblematic of the West than this pop metamorphose of aestheticized violence and decorative destruction?

I think in this way it is clear that the definitions of paradise that have so profoundly shaped the West have led to its becoming a full fledged death cult. This cult, far from being the embodied resurrection of Christ or even evangelical warfare ala Sarah Palin is instead a far more ambiguous metamorphose consisting of an infinity of images. This labyrinth, like that endless library proposed by Borges, is the penultimate merger of metaphysical cosmology, scientific empiricism, and capitalism. A modern day El Dorado, this endless horizon exists embedded on every page in the millions of dots per inch (DPI) that have come to define the West.

Saturated and effervescent this eternally streaming West is our nascent Oz, where the Technicolor dreams that shine from the hills and great mesas allude to the delusional dreams of the desert ascetic – half starving — who like Christ at Gethsemane channels the wellspring of desire that surges just below the crust, a table of liquid fantasies that would be truth. That our eyes are filled to blistering by this new image culture may portend a new science or just more of the same fantasies of lost cities.

ENDNOTES

1

In late 2002 the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfield stated in a Defense Department briefing regarding the status of the Iraq war “There are known knowns. There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we now know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don’t know.” While it is infamously oblique, I think this statement does actually poignantly capture the fog of war — a metaphor that is applicable to the West as postmodern Eden.

2

Actually color on the computer screen is not made up of CYMK colors but of RGB colors. The difference is between additive and subtractive color a highly technical but fascinating subject. I encourage you to read Richard Benson’s *The Printed Picture*, published by MOMA Press for a more in depth and erudite explanation.

3

By extraterrestrial I mean to imply not aliens as such, although they figure prominently in history from angels to UFOs, but to a more basic belief in and pursuit of a reality that extends beyond that which can be observed with the ordinary senses of perception. And further a belief that these forces can affect events in time and space.

4

Karen Armstrong’s book *The Crusades*, printed by Anchor Press, details explicitly how the Pope and other governments of Europe exploited the religious fervor and bigotry of their subjects (and their gullibility) to mount repeated crusades, a ploy aimed at avoiding widespread problems at home and, sometimes, gaining wealth and prestige for the rulers. A classic bait and switch.

4

The Holy Lance or Spear of Christ is the weapon that Longinus used to pierce Christ’s side during his crucifixion. Long sought after by successive waves of crusaders it was widely held to have magical powers.

5

Pornography is arguably one of the key industries (along with religion) to fuel all stages of image reproduction and it is certainly responsible for the significant advent of home motion picture technology (VCRs) and the subsequent digital revolution and distribution system of the Internet. However vital this history, it is more importantly a medium of lush color and unambiguously saturated tones that can be, I believe, divorced from its subject in order to appreciate its role in disseminating printed and pixellated mediums. Thumb through any skin mag of the late sixties and seventies, where the color dipped pages of *Oui*, *Playboy* or *Jiggs* fairly melt in your hand. More than titillation or wank-off material, the magazines are exquisite color filed studies, greased panes of the subtlest gradients imaginable. They’re landscapes dammit, unassailable and without hyperbole.

These unorthodox color field studies catalyzed by the evolution of printing technologies effectively amped up Western Style and launched it into the late capitalist stratosphere. From Mickey Mouse to Buck Rogers all popular culture owes at least a passing acknowledgement to porn (or is it the other way around?). Is it any wonder that in only the fourth issue of *Playboy* Ray Bradbury’s first serial of *Fahrenheit 451* made clear the intersecting trajectories of lust and apocalyptic erasure. Both, clearly, were bathed in an auratic hue of pure color.

These pages do more than suggest a liberalization of libido or a colorful baroque dance of paroxysmal proportions; they suggest a proto-geology wherein the temporal upheavals of lust are manifest in the bucking tectonics of some erstwhile extraterrestrials.

In this way the history of printed erotica is explicitly parallel to and illustrative of an archaic cosmological system of creation or origin. Played over and over on the retinas of America’s longing masses, virtual intercourse mimics the pixilated ritual of creation one click at a time. And this residual light arc, every bit as powerful as those first popularly available microscopes in the late 1800s, similarly toy with the innate desire of the viewer to catch a glimpse of the invisible forces at work in the world.

In short, the light and color of printing form an abstract conceptual basis on which to superimpose, again and again over time, a fantasy of the beginning. It is this biblical rejoinder, reminding us that in the beginning that there was light, that is the thing that established religions find most offensive about printed nudity. Not that it allows for any deviant behavior (clearly perversion has no better friend than the confines of orthodoxy), but that it strips the mythos of the creation back down its most basic origin – light dappled flesh. And like the gold that originally stood in for the sun, and the oil painted precursors to print that reflected that light, it is the serialized and mass produced volumes of printed paper (and now projections) that today captivate the masses.

The advent of mass-produced color photography parallels the advent of reflective technologies such as glass and chrome in modern architecture so that the world has become aware of itself in the folds and exponential refractions of both the camera and the streetscape. In both, the mirror predicts the physical and psychosocial vectors intersecting and mixing as predicted by the Futurists and Vorticism.

That this could be construed, as strictly a male landscape is I think disproven by the equally salacious spreads of fashion magazines that employ the same saturated colors and symbolic juxtapositions that are elicited by porn. And of course the prevailing data that pornography is increasingly being viewed by both sexes in a rise attributable most clearly to the privacy afforded by the web.

6
112 Science at the Fin d Sicle

7
162 Collected writing of Robert Smithson.

8
It is written in the New Testament and believed by most Pentecostal traditions that Armageddon will begin on the hill of - Megiddo in modern day Israel and the Rapture will follow.

10
113 Robert Smithson

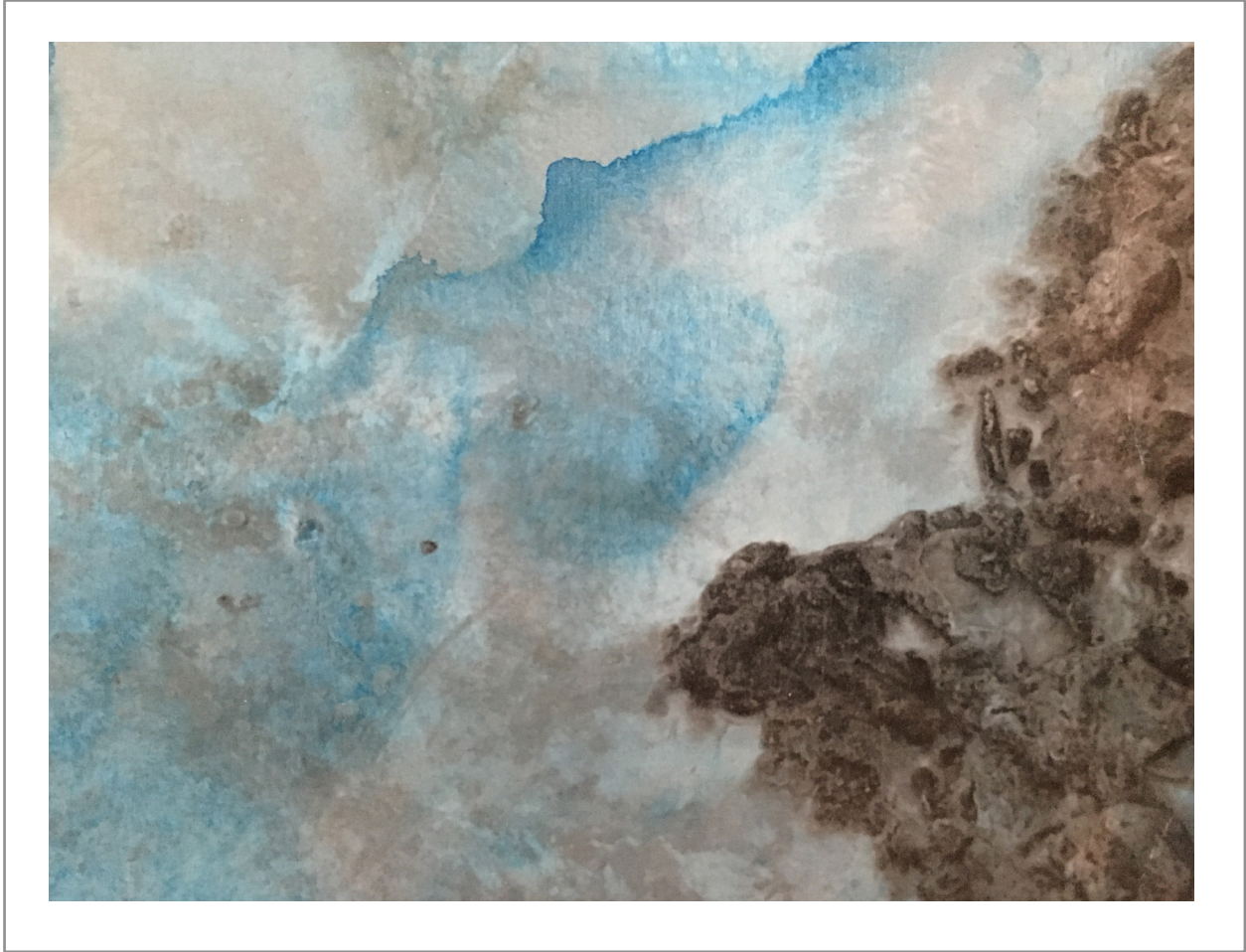
11
It seems explicit in the work of many contemporary artists who juxtapose a post nature aesthetic and vocabulary with neo-ritual and appropriated styles from architecture and pop culture. See also my essay Decorative Destruction. David Altmejd's, Banks Violet, Matthew Moynahan, Heather Rowe and other young artist's use this decorative destruction, along with in the case of Moynihan and Almejd, Barney and others the use of the dismembered and metasticizing figure. Almedj's use of the werewolf, a long held and fairly universal symbol of man and animal hybridity, betrays an anxiety about this same future and the desires and perversions that seem to never leave it alone. Indeed, the fear of the future as an explosive hyper sexualized and only distantly human place of primitive perhaps even cannibalistic desire has been part and parcel of myths since long before the Biblical fall. Indeed, the Jewish story of Golem and the aforementioned story of Osiris reveal a poignant framing of

our nightmares vis a vis the restless churning mud of our erstwhile mothership and latent desire for death. This is another kind of precedent that has been evoked countless times in contemporary science fiction and disaster genres (beautiful collapse). (See Mike Davis' authoritative Ecology of Fear).

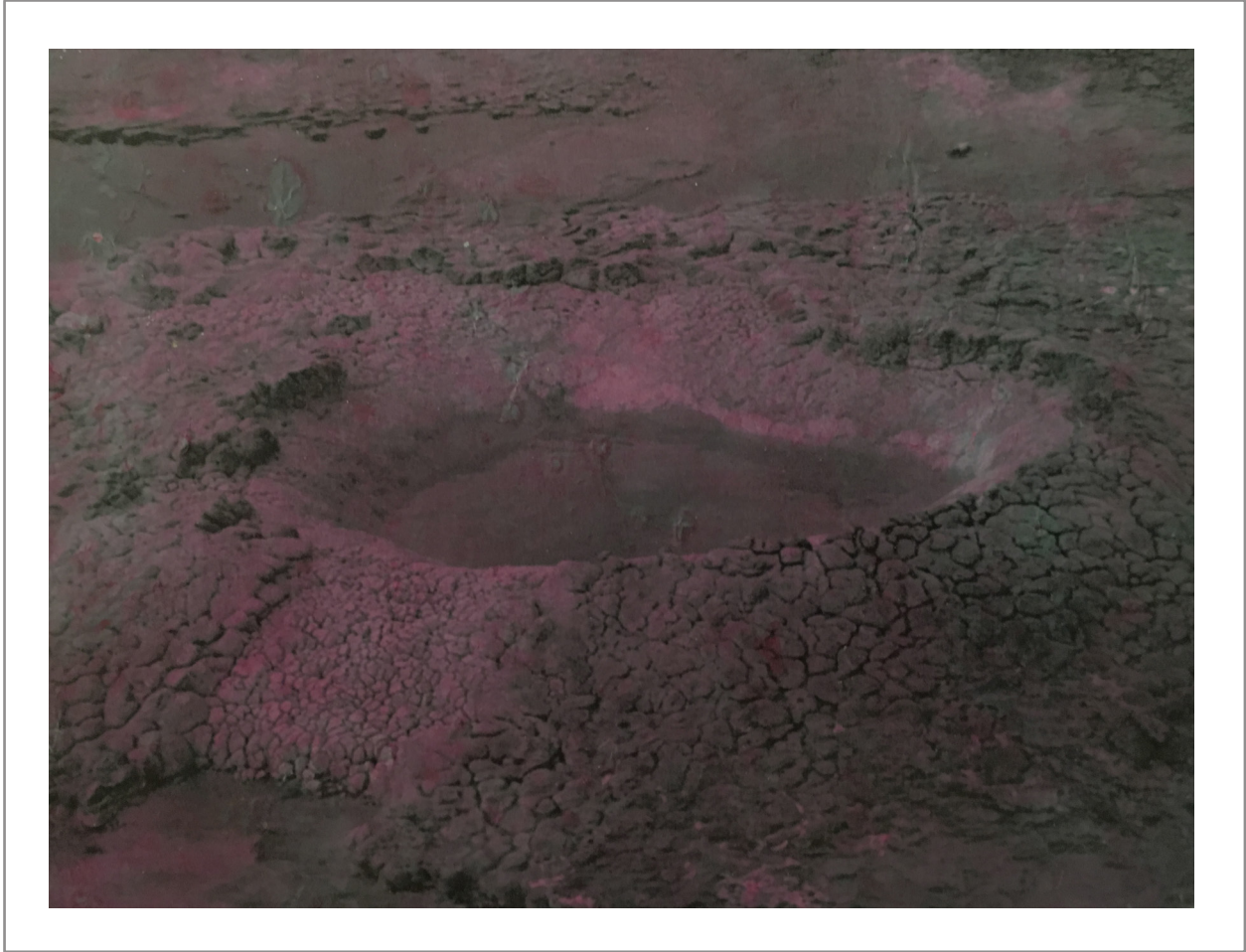
12
For Palin and many Pentecostal evangelicals, there is a strong tradition of spiritual warfare, which is referred to as The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit or the New Apostolic Reformation. According to Bruce Wilson writing in the Huffington Post "The Third Wave is a revival of the theology of the Latter Rain tent revivals of the 1950s and 1960s led by William Branham and others. It is based on the idea that in the end times there will be an outpouring of supernatural powers on a group of Christians that will take authority over the existing church and the world. The believing Christians of the world will be reorganized under the Fivefold Ministry and the church restructured under the authority of Prophets and Apostles and others anointed by God. The young generation will form "Joel's Army" to rise up and battle evil and retake the earth for God.

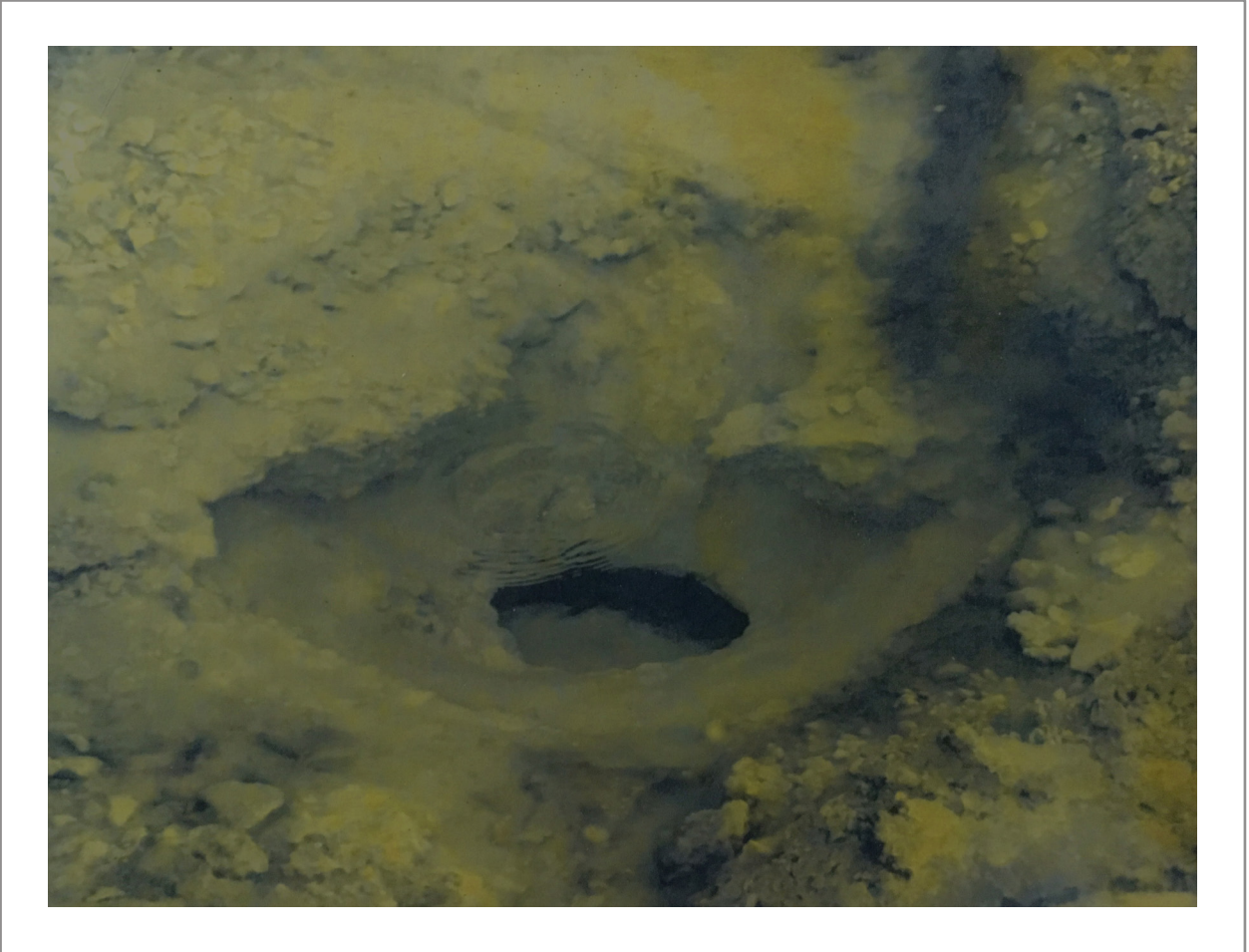
**While Christianity has used various methods of depicting the divinity of Christ over its long reign including as noted the use of gold, none is more famous or important than the use of oil paint. What made oil paint so important was that it could realistically depict Christ in the flesh. The way oil paint captured light and communicated the corpus christi was of utmost importance in communicating that Christ was human and died for men's sins. The belief that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine was established by the Council of Chalcedon, which adopted the doctrine known as the hypostatic union. Hypostasis comes from the Greek word for reality or subsistence.

Upper Geyser Basin, Yellowstone, Montana

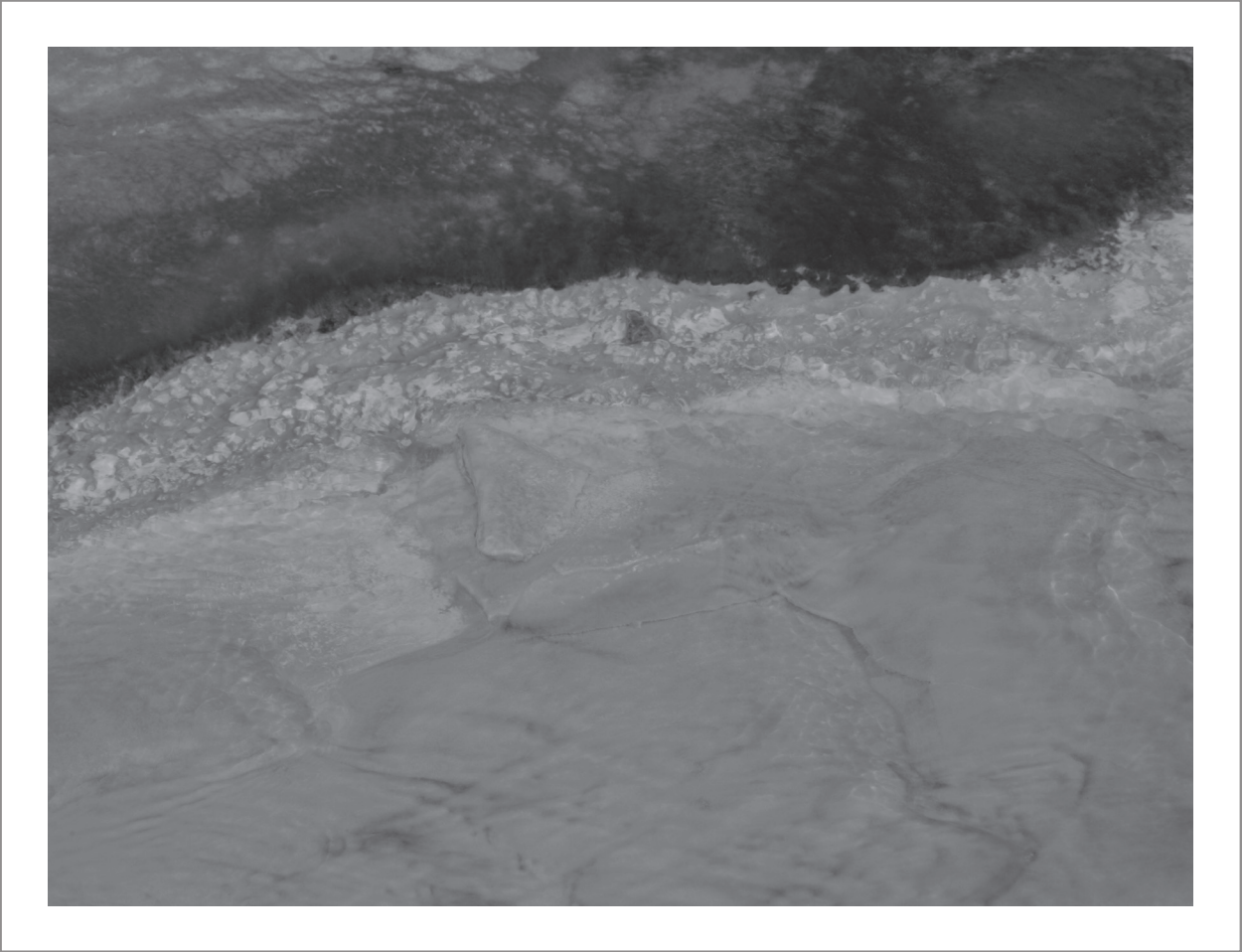


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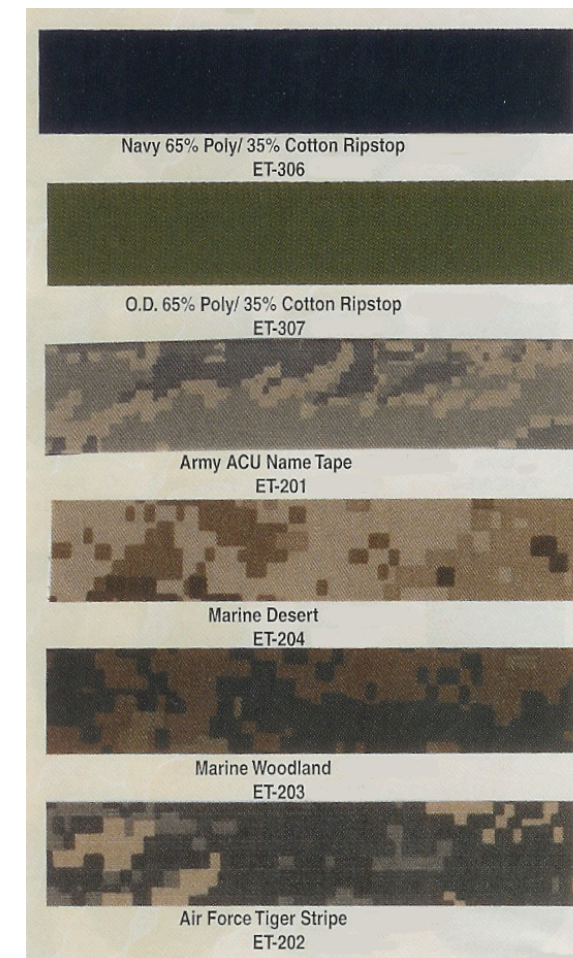
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WESTERN STYLE MARKETPLACE

Color schemes in a Western room center around honey colored wood, gray rock, and black metals. Accent colors are often brick red, terra-cotta, forest green, or navy, though cream, gray, and other tones might be used to coordinate with a Western styled fabric, rug, or wall hanging.



An abundance of natural materials is key to decorating in a Western style. Rock, wood, metal, and leather are the main ingredients, with wool, birchbark, beadwork and antlers playing an important secondary role.





Western motifs can include any of the following: cowboys, cattle, deer, bear, moose, fishing, mountains, pine trees, leaves, oaks, pine cones, acorns, horses, lakes, rivers, fishing, riding, hunting, wildflowers, grasses, and so on.





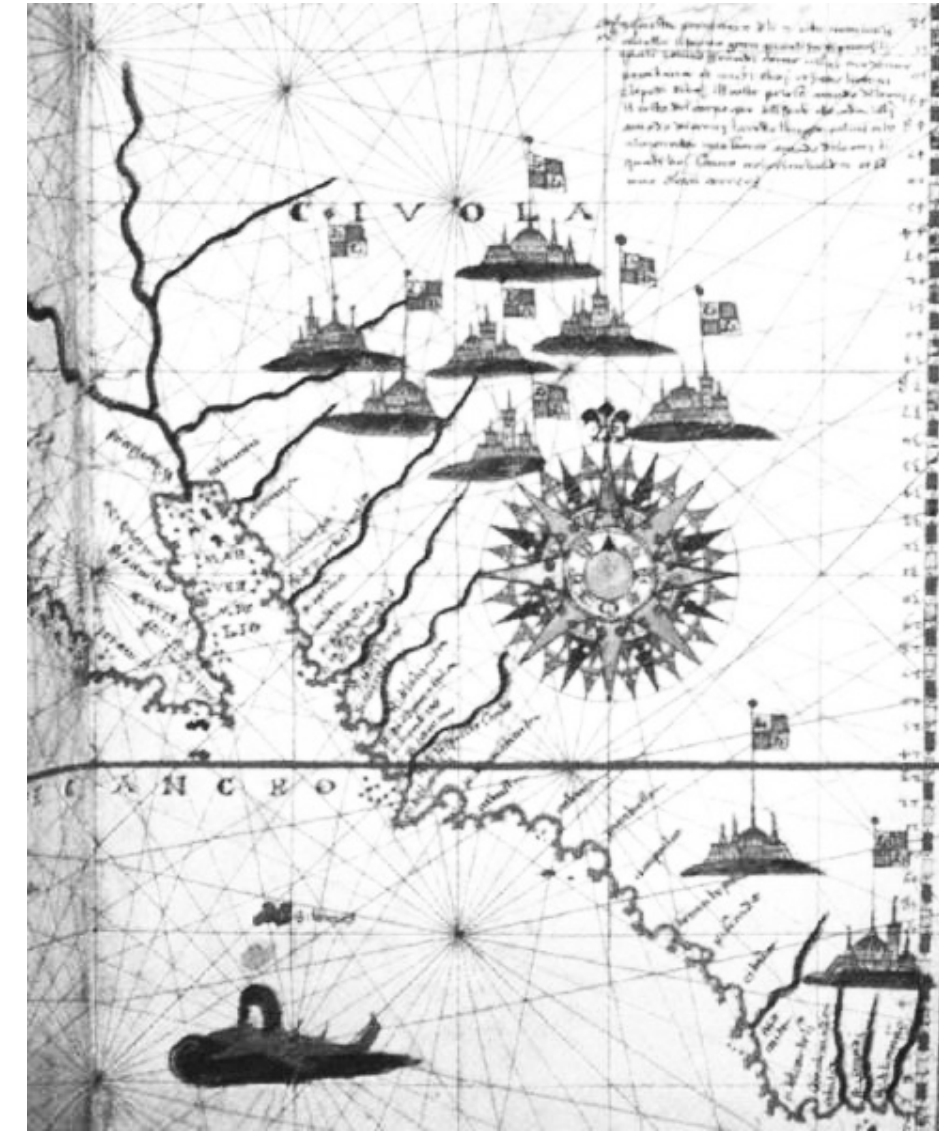
Artwork should feature Western styled motifs and might be oil paintings, drawings, vintage photos, sepia toned illustrations, antique Western postcards or book illustrations.



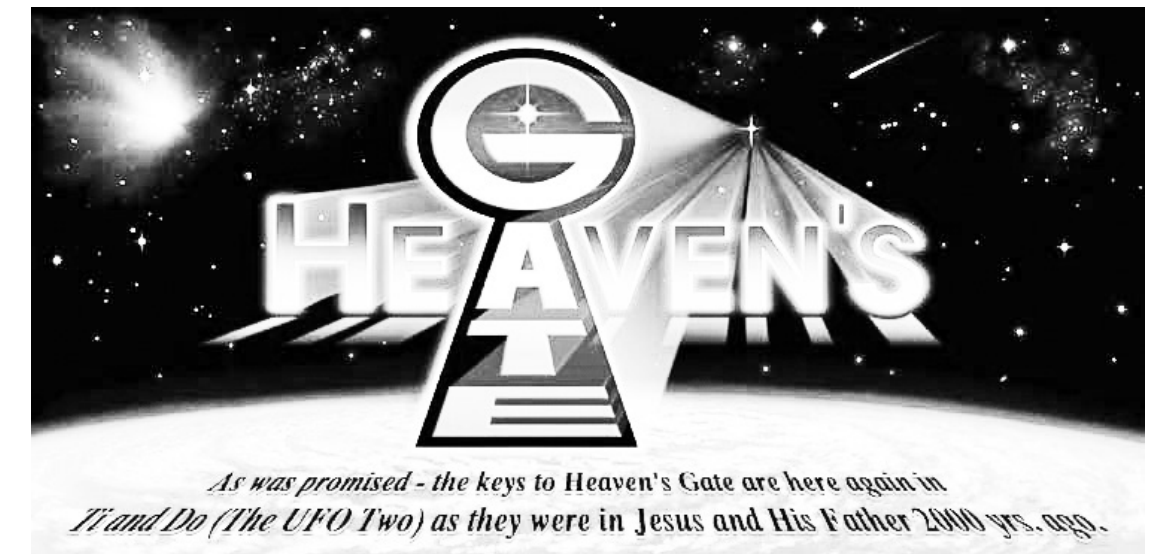


A Western dining room is stocked with sturdy stoneware, pottery accents, twig placemats, and accessories that might use Indian, mountain, cowboy, or fishing motifs.

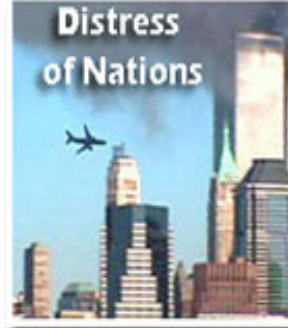
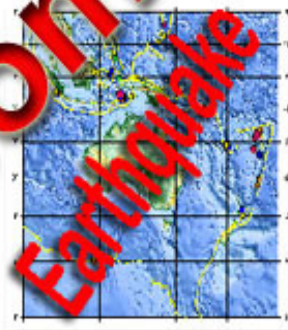
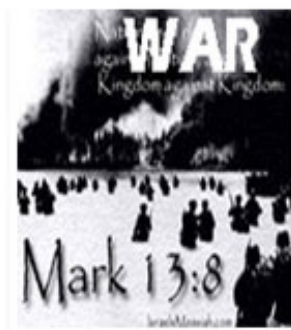




Window treatments should be simple and not overpowering. Whenever possible, leave windows uncluttered to showcase a wonderful mountain view. Otherwise look for wooden shutters or blinds, flat roman shades, or simple curtain panels.

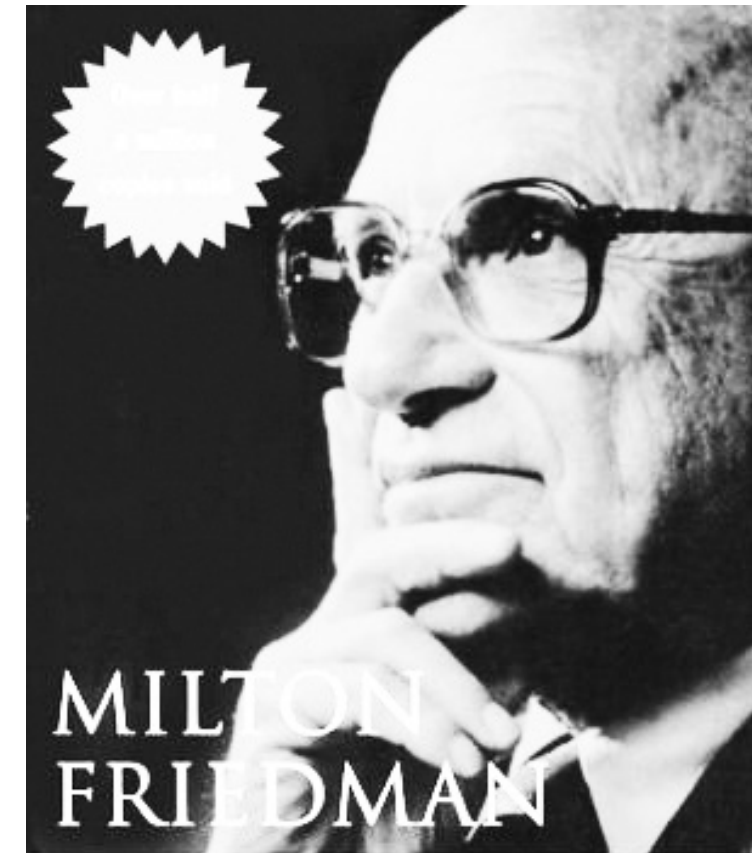


Bible Prophecy - Signs Of The End Times



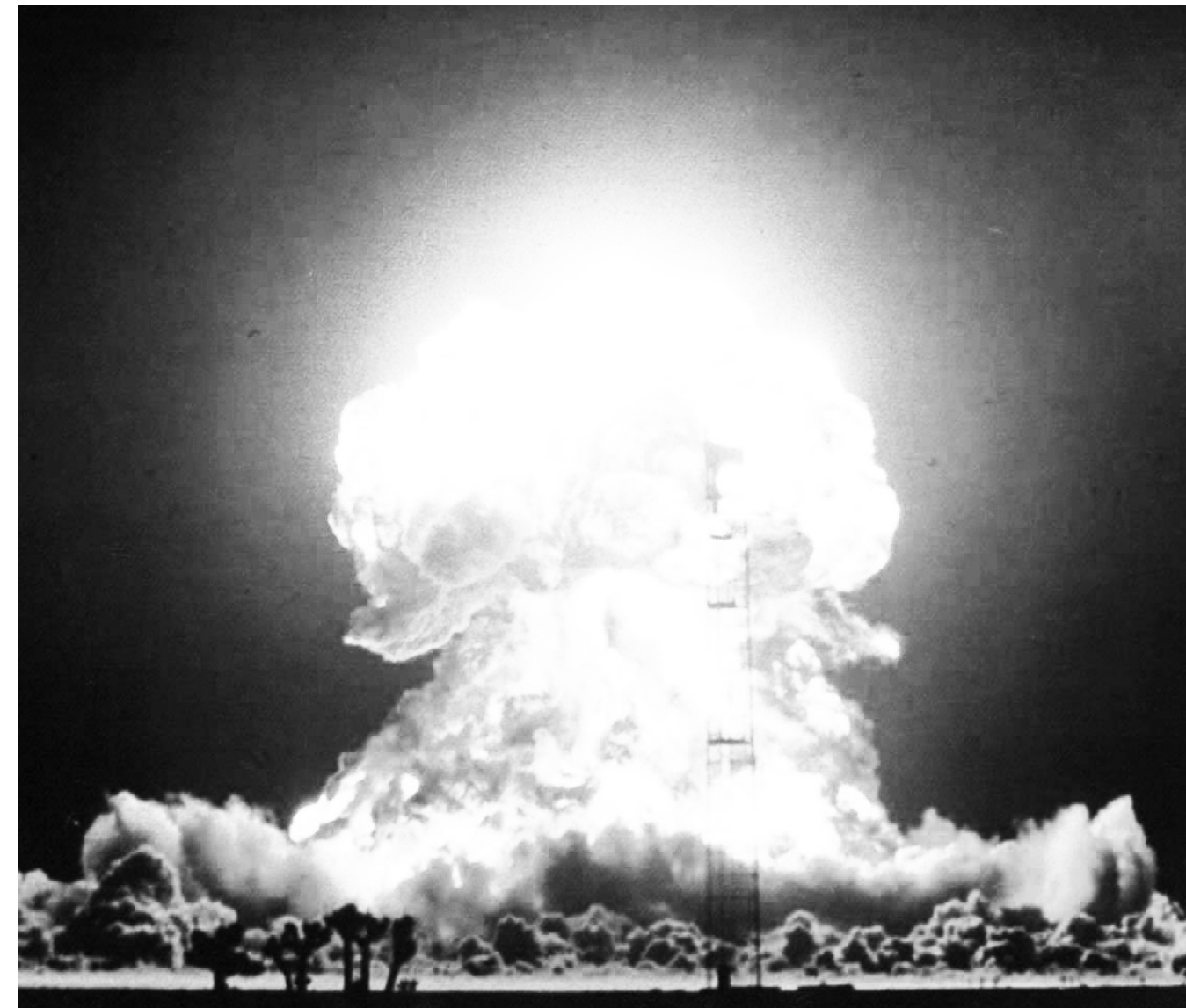
Decorative details in a Western styled decor include log and twig accents, nailhead designs, leather fringing, yarn whipstitching, Indian motif beading and the like.





CAPITALISM
AND FREEDOM

The fireplace and mantle are essential to a Western themed room. Dress it with functional iron fireplace tools, a decorative metalwork screen, and simple mantle accessories such as hurricane candle shades, a display of pinecones, or a rugged cast bronze sculpture of a cowboy on a horse.





Vintage accessories add an “it’s always been here” look. See if you can find an old radio, rusted metal pails, saddlebags, spurs, toboggans, books, skis, snowshoes, or other worn items.





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