



COURSE NOTES LS1

PERCEPTIONS OF THE LANDSCAPE

How do we perceive the landscape?

- Is it somewhere familiar; the Lake District, Snowdonia, Gower or the great view from the hill overlooking your house?
- Is it mountains, lakes, the sea, rolling fields, the sky and those other grand scale things we look for?
- Is it a famous feature that you know; the lighthouse overlooking the sea, the castle standing on top of a hill, the familiar mountain you've climbed?
- Is it the little things you come across that inspire you: the isolated tree, the rock outcrop, the rainbow, the pattern in the sand, the wave, the straw bale in a field, bluebells in a wood,
- Is it the moods that the landscape evokes? The romance, mists, the dawn sunlight, autumn colours, the bareness of winter, the isolation of the moors, a stormy sky?

In truth, the landscape is all of these. The best landscape photographs are those that successfully convey the message that you want them to. There are many different ways we can define landscapes in photography. I prefer an abstract interpretation: I find that this helps me define and interpret what I am looking for. So, a landscape becomes a mood, a pattern, a texture, a colour, a lighting effect and so on. It isn't first and foremost a picture 'of something or somewhere' – but in commercial terms that is important and more on that later!!

Like in most aspects of photography, the overriding questions are '**Why am I taking this picture**' and '**What is it about it I am trying to capture**'?

- '**Why am I taking this picture?**': Essentially there are two reasons why people take pictures. One is purely a **record of what they see in front of them**. Most holiday photographs fall into this category but also many professionally taken images also belong here. Clients often demand a realistic view, well composed and nothing more, particularly those who want to 'sell a destination'. This does not invalidate these images as landscape photographs. The other is '**artistic interpretation**' in one form or another, where the main purpose is to produce a striking image. Perhaps here, the focus is more on the light, the angle of view, a specific feature and other elements that can lift the image beyond a direct interpretation. There is of course a considerable blurring of the boundaries between the two.
- '**What is it I am trying to capture?**': Is there something significant or special they you want to get across? (If not possibly ask yourself the first question of 'Why I am I taking this picture' – you may find that you don't want to take it after all! (*Tip for improving your photography: try not to*

fall into the digital photography trap of 'taking it anyway because it's free'. Try to be selective in subjects as it leads to more thought, consideration and better images!)

The following are a number of ways landscape photographs can be perceived:

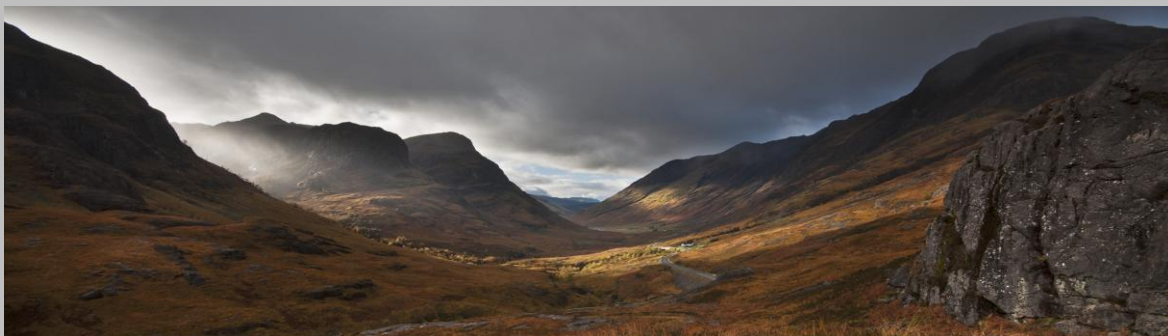
Pictorial landscapes

This is the 'literal interpretation' landscape photograph. Well composed, obviously of a specific location but leaving little scope for individual interpretation. These images, while in truth slightly uninspiring photographically have a significant commercial market, both with tourism providers and people who want a visual record of where they have walked or visited. In this respect the location is important with this type of image – popular and recognisable. The images below are examples:



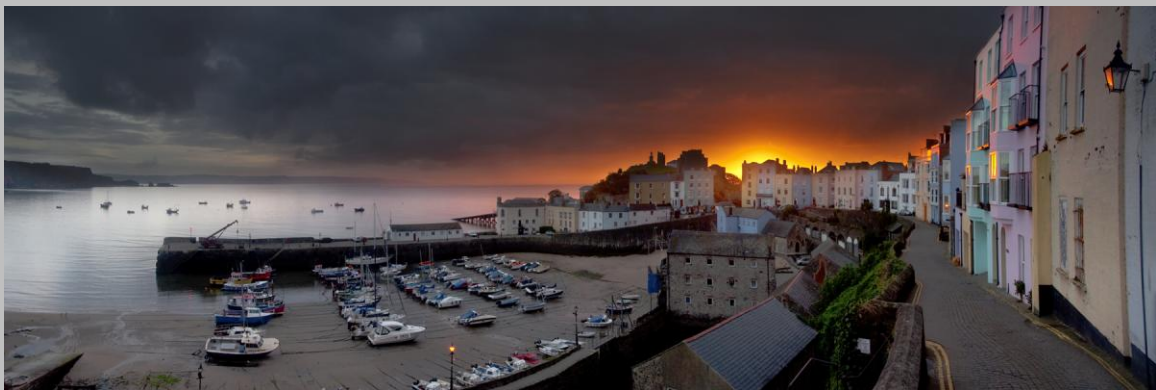
'Romantic' Landscapes

These are still clearly of a specific location) but have a quality which lifts them above the 'literal interpretation'. This may be because of the lighting conditions, the composition or other dimension. For example the picture below right is of a well known church in the Brecon Beacons, but the misty light and sculptural form of the tree gives it the feel of a Japanese watercolour. In the example bottom left, the sky and shadows give the picture a dramatic quality.



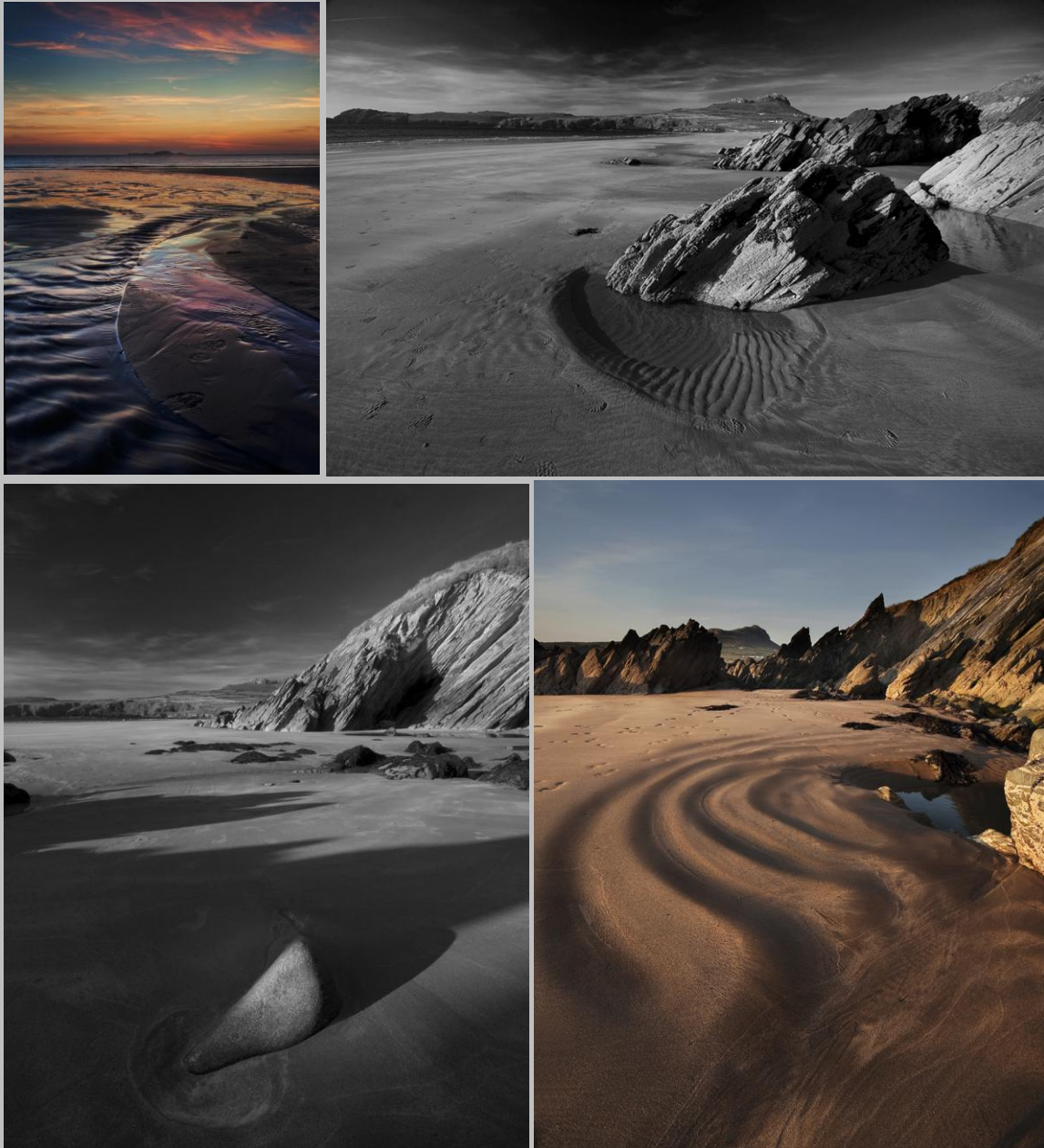
'Iconic' Landscapes

These are first and foremost of a specific (and popular!) location. A famous mountain, town, castle or other landmark as in the examples above. They are also widely photographed as they are so popular. Photographing them in a different way is therefore a challenge. Try to think of an angle of view, a lighting effect, unusual weather condition, night-time or other approach that lifts them beyond the other images you see of these places. If you are looking to sell your work, these images have a wider appeal than any other because of the combination of popular location and original approach.



Abstract Landscapes

These images rely less on the location but more on the colour, form and pattern of the elements within the landscape. All the images below were taken at Whitesands Beach in Pembrokeshire, but in some ways the location is incidental and secondary to the visual effect these forms create. Notice that with these images, the 'vista' or wider landscape is secondary to the foreground detail.



Coastal features are great for abstract landscapes; but similar effects can be created through other landforms. Look for simple patterns, a limited range of colours (don't forget, those with obtrusive colours can be converted to black & white). See examples below.



Landscape moods / Photographing the Light

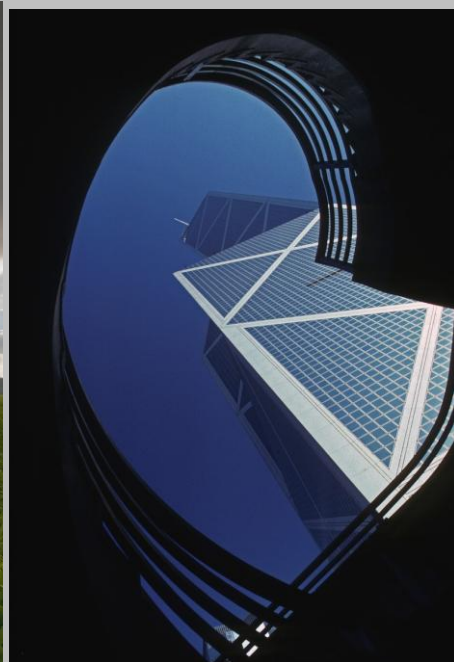
These images are usually taken in unusual light / weather conditions and within an hour or so of sunrise and sunset. The question is often – are we primarily photographing the light or the landscape? Often, fairly mundane places can be transformed. Longer shadows, greater luminosity of light, morning mist and the effects of sunlight bursting through clouds make for potentially exciting images. Be prepared for wet, cold and / or windy weather, not to mention being out early or late! Clouds in the sky don't just mean the sight of clouds as opposed to blue sky; they mean rapidly changing light as the sun illuminates the land and the sky.





Dramatic perspective

Often landscape images depend less on mood or romantic quality than simple use of a wide angle lens and dramatic sky. Often the most striking effects can be created by shooting from as low a position as possible.



Telephoto Landscapes

Unlike wide angle lenses, telephoto lenses compress perspective rather than expand it rather than create dramatic perspective effects. This can however be very effective, appearing to bring distant background subjects much closer to the foreground. Look for sunsets where the sun is setting is a red ball in a hazy sky. **UNLESS THE SUNSET IS LIKE THIS & THE SUN IS FAINT NEVER LOOK AT THE SUN THROUGH A CAMERA VIEWFINDER AS IT CAN DAMAGE YOUR EYESIGHT**



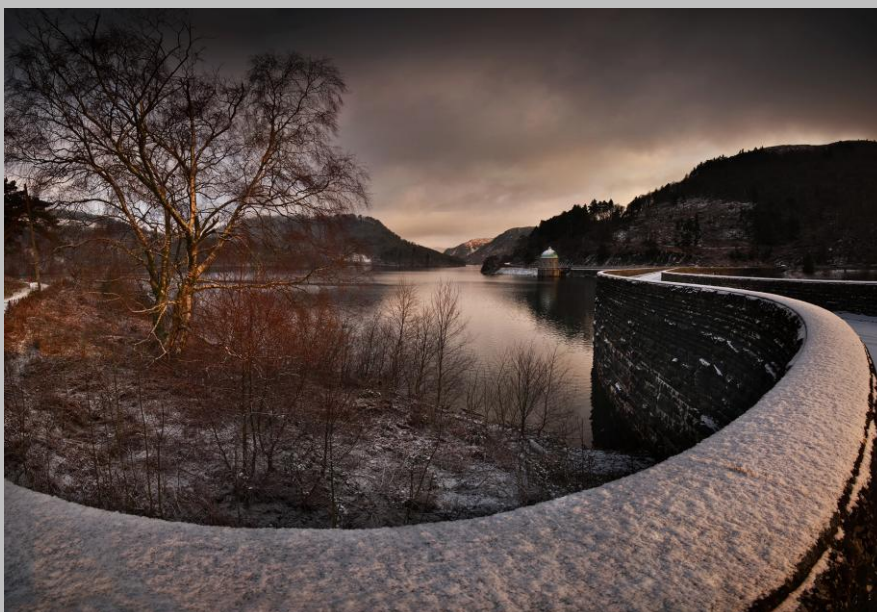
SOME EXAMPLES OF TELEPHOTO URBAN LANDSCAPES

Creating an effective landscape composition:

Like in other aspects of photography, the types of images listed above are not independent of each other; these are often combined to create an effect. To use the image below as an example:

- The picture is of a well known location – The Dam at Caban Coch Reservoir in the Elan Valley
- There is a dark sombre sky which adds mood to the image
- The single tree is picked out by a red dawn light.
- The dam wall is a strong part of the picture as the light has caught the snow topped dam wall.

Potentially the image contains a lot of competing elements. However, the dam wall is used as part of the composition to 'wrap' round the picture & bind all these elements together.



RECOMMENDED EXERCISES IN PERCEPTIONS OF THE LANDSCAPE

- **Think how you perceive the landscape:** List types of landscape that you can think of and find 3 illustrations of each (either from your own files or from the internet). Think about landscape location, landscape character or landscape mood.
- **Your Landscape Type Images:** Take 3 of your own images that you think best fit each of your chosen landscape types and state why you have taken them and how you think they fit.
- **Take 3 of each of images of the following:**
 - Pictorial / Romantic landscapes
 - Abstract Landscapes
 - Landscape moods / Photographing the light
 - Dramatic Perspectives / Telephoto Landscapes
 - A combination of any 2 of the above