4. Transatlantic dialogues on nature: art, theater and beyond

The last chapter ended with a discussion of Alexander von Humboldt’s legacy in the history of images of colonial landscapes. These images have circulated in the intervening years in specific ways that I to explore in this chapter. Especially with respect to the American West these images were, to some extent at least, shaped artistically by German-American painter Albert Bierstadt, who lived and worked in the latter half of the nineteenth century; he was one of the first artists after the first generation of expedition painters (George Catlin, John James Audubon, Alfred Jacob Miller and others) who traveled West on several expeditions and transformed what he saw into memorable scenes for his contemporaries in America and abroad. In contrast to Catlin, Bierstadt no longer saw the ‘virgin’ landscape that had not yet been traversed by European Americans. He saw the West in its making, so to speak, after the arrival of Europeans but before it had been codified as pristine wilderness and elevated to national icon through the establishment of the first national parks. Lewis and Clark first traveled west without an artist on their crew, but Samuel Seymour and Titian Ramsay Peale accompanied Stephen H. Long’s expedition to the Rockies in 1819-1820. George Catlin was the first white artist to depict the tribes of the Upper Missouri in 1832. The Swiss draftsman Karl Bodmer accompanied an expedition in 1833 and brought back detailed drawings of Western landscapes. Alfred Jacob Miller came back with romantic visions from his expedition in 1837, and John James Audubon made his first sketches of Western birds in 1834. In 1869, Fredrick S. Dellenbaugh accompanied John Wesley Powell on his historic journey down the Colorado River and through the rapids of the Grand Canyon. These artists established an important tradition of artistically figuring Western scenes that Bierstadt was familiar with and transforms into powerful scenes. I suggest that we think of them as dialectical images as Walter Benjamin had described them, images that are temporarily frozen like slides under the microscope of the artist, lifted from their natural environment and stripped of their immediacy, in order that they might be relevant for the
present (see Wolin 1982: 125). This reconfiguration of the spectacular Western landscape as panorama set in motion a development in landscape art that transformed the early images of the American West as a sublime space into a mode of representation that is much more indebted to contemporary European models of landscape painting (see Krause/Franz 2008: 395ff.). This aesthetic regime is indebted to the modern environmental imagination as it emerged first in the writings and illustrations of Georg Forster and Alexander von Humboldt.

Gordon M. Sayre, citing the tradition of the sublime established by the British philosopher Edmund Burke and developed further by Immanuel Kant, defines sublime spectacles as intense striking scenes that often double up as national emblems (2003: 103). But he also found that “early Americans did not see the natural sublime as antithetical to the human goals or as uses of natural resources. Moreover, a scientific or rational conception of these spectacles did not exclude the perpetuation of folklore about their marvels and mysteries” (Sayre 2003: 104). Sayre points to the fact that these early images of the sublime – in the absence of expedition paintings or photography – were frequently conveyed in writing before a tradition of American landscape painting was firmly established. In contrast to the later Romantic conception of the sublime, “mountains appear to represent Enlightenment values of order and restraint, while rivers stand for the wild powers of nature” (Sayre 2003: 112). In other words, these eighteenth-century observers did not express a Romantic sense of the sublime spectacle as a sacred place or as manifestations of God’s power in the form of natural beauty. Although they shared some of Kant’s notions of the sublime, they did not see beauty in nature as defined by his famous dictum of ‘purposiveness without purpose’. They were inclined instead to see the hand of the Creator as mimicking the works of humans (see Sayre 2003: 115).

A painter who worked contemporaneously with Burke and Kant and who pioneered the genre of the Alpine landscape, with its typical ravines, waterfalls, and tectonics of erosion was the Swiss artist Caspar Wolf. Wolf hiked into the Alpine valleys with small pieces of cardboard and a palette of oils to create sketches from nature scenes that he then finished in his studio only to drag them back to the scene for a final check to make sure they were precise renditions of what he saw. He focused on rock formations and water in its various stages – as glacier, waterfall, mountain lake or even as fog and rain, and he pioneered the technique of double framing by introducing hiking