

EXPERIENCING THE PICTURESQUE

PENARTH PIER



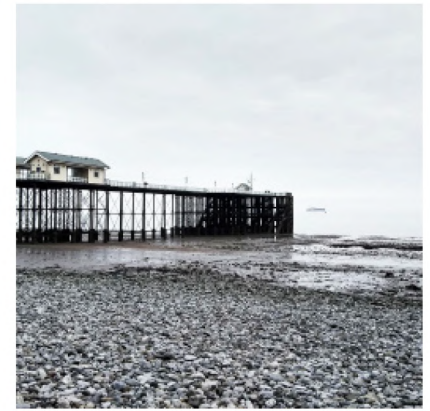
On an overcast day, walking along Penarth pier is to stand in a limitless expanse, where the boundaries between sky, sea and coastline are no more than diffuse strata of grey and the palest of blue. Whilst this sense of the infinite is sublime, it is hard to find the picturesque here. Selecting any one view discards every adjacent one, only fractionally different and just as magnificent in its cold, fluid beauty. This is a landscape to be viewed in continuous stares, fixating on every minute change. Scenes like this cannot be confined to a picture. Gilpin shares this expression of nature being too vast for comprehension¹. His picturesque is described as aiming to “recompose nature”² into combinations confined enough for our understanding. This essay will create a tour of Penarth Pier, searching for the picturesque by applying Gilpin’s definitions to create picturesque views³.

¹ William Gilpin, *Observations On The River Wye* (London: R. Blamire, 1782), p. 18.

² Robert J. (Robert John) Mayhew, “William Gilpin And The Latitudinarian Picturesque”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 33.3 (2000), 361 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/ecs.2000.0028>>.

³ This essay will examine the picturesque movement through an illustrated exploration of Penarth Pier, influenced by the style of Gilpin’s travel tours.





So allow your gaze to break and your feet to wonder. Step back towards the seafront, down through the concrete stairs and drift along the beach. Admire the pier floating into the distance. Supported by ever thinner lines and shadows, and step beneath the pier's structure. Just ahead, place yourself within the small clearing in the columns and feel "I am in the middle of it"⁴.

*Although Cullens writings developed a slightly different definition of the picturesque, which for this essay I will not explore, this quote seems to echo Gilpin's belief that people feel their surroundings rather than study them.*⁵

⁴ Gordon Cullen, *Concise Townscape*, 1st edn (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1961), p. 9.

⁵ William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty ; On Picturesque Travel ; And On Sketching Landscape* (London: Printed for R. Blamire, 1792), p. 50.

Softened by shadow, the concrete columns contrast and frame the landscape. Now divided into definable layers of sight and focus, no longer too emotive to stand and view. Gilpin argues the picturesque exists between the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime, possessing a painting-like quality⁶. In the *Photographic Picturesque* his compositions are described as a series of screens forming the foreground, centre and background of a painting⁷. The supports of the pier create a frame within which these layers can exist. By using the pier as a camera, we can align these layers into picturesque wholes.

⁶ Dabney Townsend, "The Picturesque", *The Journal Of Aesthetics And Art Criticism*, 55.4 (1997), 365 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/430924>>.

⁷ James S. Ackerman, "The Photographic Picturesque", *Artibus Et Historiae*, 24.48 (2003), 83 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1483732>>.



Perhaps the view through the first column cannot be considered picturesque. The middle ground is cropped too close to balance the dark cliffs thrusting upwards. However, step forward and take one-hundred and sixty-one paces. Beneath your feet there now should lay a concrete path, course and starkly unnatural, yet so closely matched in tone as to reside comfortably within the landscape. This can be seen to echo how Gilpin's illustrations apply a tinted wash to unify his compositions⁹. From here look out to the coast. This viewpoint now reveals the dynamic pull of the foreground flowing into the distance . If the difference between the picturesque and a picture is movement¹⁰ then this scene epitomises how movement can be peaceful.

⁹ Gordon V. Boudreau, "H. D. Thoreau, William Gilpin, And The Metaphysical Ground Of The Picturesque", *American Literature*, 45.3 (1973), 357- 364<<https://doi.org/10.2307/2924610>>.

¹⁰ John Macarthur, *The Picturesque Architecture, Disgust And Other Irregularities*, 1st edn (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2008), p. 233.



²² View the length of the pier

Before returning to our camera continue seventy-five paces towards the sea-worn rocks shielding the promenade. Pause to view the full length of the pier. Can this view be defined as picturesque? Gilpin's picturesque favoured the uneven and rough parts of nature, claiming the picturesque as "interrupting the regular line"¹¹. Although the supports are manufactured of straight lines, The forms of the structure create a rhythmic order to the magnitude of the seascape. The varied density of weight and angle creates an almost ruinous effect. Despite this view's wide vista, the irregularity supporting Penarth pier seems to reflect his claims that 'ruins' create character within a scene¹².

¹¹ Boudreau, p. 363 - 364

¹² Gilpin, *Three Essays*. p. 28.

²¹ Through the first column



Using the pier as a camera echoes the traditional use of Claude glasses⁸ to create picturesque compositions. This is also echoed by the filters applied over the photographs illustrating this piece.

⁸ Lars Kiel Bertelsen, "The Claude Glass: A Modern Metaphor Between Word And Image", *Word & Image*, 20.3 (2004), 185 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2004.10444015>>.

²³ Standing on a concrete path



Once back within our camera, lookout from the gap to the right of the centre of the pier. The beach here forms a prominent foreground flowing into the hazy cliff face. Although you could argue that the balance of the composition is weighted towards the landmass, Gilpin suggests that utilising the sky within a composition can allow you to create a distinct atmosphere¹³. By positioning the sky so it becomes an equal size within the composition as the landmass the sense of imbalance is removed. The view becomes more serene, revealing the quiet power of the ocean whilst containing the sublime within the pier's frame. Gilpin's work emphasises the ever-changing nature of the coast¹⁴. As the day passes our camera encapsulates this, lost beneath the rising sea.

To find our last scene wonder three-hundred and thirteen steps from within our camera. By leaning over the barrier to create a clear foreground you exert a frame on the scene. The picturesque elements re-emerge, with the pier acting as a balance to the composition of the picture. Whilst Gilpin considered the sea to be sublime, Penarth pier can not only be used within Picturesque compositions but to create them; Surrounding it even he rolling mist creates a unified tone to create a more "picturesque" effect. The Picturesque can certainly be found here.

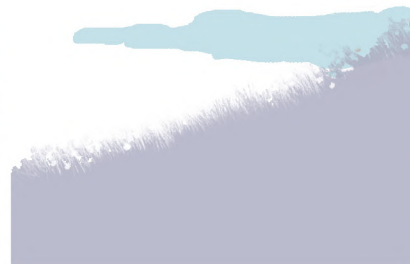
¹³ Gilpin, *Three Essays*. P. 13.

¹⁴ Zoë Kinsley, "William Gilpin At The Coast: A New Perspective On Picturesque Travel Writing", *The Review Of English Studies*, 68.284 (2016), 323 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgw095>>.

²⁴ A Picturesque composition



²⁵ Along the beach



■ Foreground ■ Background

²⁶ Tour ending

