Introduction

Anyone who drives along America’s highways sooner or later encounters a sign announcing a scenic overlook. Pulling into a parking lot, we find ourselves looking down at an extended vista, often with the aid of pay-per-view telescopes or binoculars. We may feel awed by the vastness of the scene, perhaps even a touch of vertigo as we stare at the Pacific Ocean from a bluff north of Big Sur or at the Hudson River from a pull-off high in the Catskill Mountains. Yet even if the experience of a panoramic view can often be dizzying and overwhelming, its attraction is undeniable. For tourists to New York City, a trip to the top of the Empire State Building or a helicopter tour of Manhattan is often de rigueur. And no American Grand Tour is complete without visits to the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls – both characteristically viewed from a cliff or promontory that gives onto a vast open space.

I will begin by describing this commonplace landscape experience because as a cultural practice it seems to naturalize itself. It recapitulates a particular imaginative relation between viewer and viewed, spectator and spectacle – a relation whose pervasiveness pretty much guarantees its invisibility. In this essay, I explore the history of this type of relation, which, as I shall argue, pervades American visual culture.¹

1 Landscape and Domination

Despite the singularity of the term, landscape can be many things: one of the less pleasant things it can be is an aspect of domination. As W. J. T. Mitchell has observed, “landscape might be seen [...] as something like the ‘dream-work’ of imperialism” (10). Taken by itself, Mitchell’s statement reduces to a clever aphorism. However, the aphorism glosses a complicated argument for a critical approach to the study of the history of landscape vision that can be abbreviated as ‘landscape as ideology.’ At the risk of reiterating what may be

¹ This article borrows elements from my own essays “Making a Picture of the View from Mount Holyoke” (80-91, 310-312), “Accounting for the Panoramic in Hudson River School Landscape Painting,” (78-89), and “Afterword” (315-321).
well known to you, I will recapitulate, schematically, one version of ‘landscape as ideology.’

The western landscape tradition centers on a subject-object relation that can be described in terms of antithetical or opposed pairs: ‘me-it, self and other, viewer and viewed, spectator and spectacle. In this tradition, the viewer-subject dominates imaginatively an expanse of actual or represented landscape, seascape, or cityscape. The relation I am describing is a form of alienation, of “not belonging,” but it is not only, as Robin Kelsey has argued, humanity “not belonging to the totality of [terrestrial] life,” but also the more familiar representation of humanity divided into classes, a representation of social hierarchy and division (203-13). Landscapes of this type caused the viewer to objectify the viewed, to see it as disconnected, as other.

Historically, the type of landscape I am describing prompted the viewer-subject to identify, symbolically, with dominant forms of social and political power. In England in the early modern period, the prospect was the leading landscape type. Initially a literary convention, it became in the course of the eighteenth century an established landscape-painting genre. A prospect was, in the critic James Turner’s words, “the expert presentation of distant views (not necessarily of countryside) to create the illusion of realism and totality” (290). Totality was key. As Carol Fabricant has written, in the eighteenth century

mountain peaks and other promontories became central features of aristocratic landscapes—and later important features of the landscape toured and described by those who aspired to replace the nobility in the newly emerging social order. From such heights the eighteenth-century spectator, like a lord overseeing his creation, was able to “command” [as the aesthetician William Gilpin wrote] a view of the country stretching out beneath him and thereby exert control over it in much the same way that the aristocratic class (at least through the seventeenth century) ruled over those on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. (“Landscape” 56)

A few lines from The Traveller; Or, A Prospect Of Society, Oliver Goldsmith’s famous poem of 1764, underscores this point:

[…] where Alpine solitudes ascend,
I sit me down a pensive hour to spend;
And, plac’d on high above the storm’s career,
Look downward where an hundred realms appear;
Lakes, forests, cities, plain, extending wide,
The pomp of kings, the shepherd’s humbler pride. (qtd. in Eliot)

Goldsmith’s protagonist, exempt from the storms and troubles of the world below, oversees the “hundred realms” that represent “society” – a relation between viewer and viewed that was soon replicated in the painted panorama.
2 The Panoramic

In the eighteenth century, English artists made the prospect one of the most familiar landscape painting conventions. Yet when it came to representing the totalizing vision Goldsmith and others described, it proved insufficient. In the 1780s English and American artists, including the Marylander Charles Willson Peale, spurred on by such recent developments as balloon ascents and the proliferation of tower and steeple views, were developing new representational techniques: Peale, for example, experimented with a drawing device that he used in an attempt to render a circular bird’s eye view from, significantly, the dome of the Maryland State House in Annapolis (see Bellion). This growing interest in the representation of a totalizing vision led, almost inevitably, to the invention of the panorama.

Robert Barker created the first large-scale panorama in London in 1788; the word panorama – meaning, literally, all-seeing (from the Greek pan + horama) – was coined a few years later. Typically, panorama paintings were exhibited in specially designed rotundas. To view a painting spectators climbed a tower, located at the center of the rotunda, to a viewing platform. The viewing platform was positioned in such a way that the painting’s horizon-line roughly coincided with the spectators’ eye level, which meant that spectators experienced a sensation of looking down upon the scene. This was only one of several carefully calculated visual effects. The painting was illuminated by hidden skylights, while the rotunda and its contents (the tower, the viewing platform) remained shrouded in darkness. The resulting contrast between light and dark, between the painting and the ghostly or insubstantial realm inhabited by the spectators – who thereby became anonymous and invisible witnesses to the scene – produced a powerful trompe-l’oeil effect, making the painting the only visible ‘reality.’ All this was done to maximize visual drama since spectators did not casually come upon the painting but emerged from the shadowy space of the tower onto the viewing platform where the painting suddenly burst upon them. This was a dramatic and no doubt sublime moment that early panorama visitors often found overwhelming. Viewing a panorama could result in dizziness and, according to one German visitor to an early panorama, “Sehkrankheit,” or see-sickness (Oettermann 12-13). The panorama might thus be thought of as a machine or engine of sight in which the visible world was reproduced in a way that hid or disguised the fact that vision required an apparatus of production, and that what was being produced was not only a spectacle but a spectator with a particular relation to ‘reality.’

The historian Stephan Oettermann has argued for the historical specificity of panoramic vision: that the invention of the panorama belongs to a period of political and industrial revolutions – a period in which new forms of mid-

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2 The most comprehensive history of the panorama is Stephan Oettermann’s The Panorama, History of a Mass Medium (1997 [1980]). See also Avery et al; Corner; Hyde.
Middle-class hegemony arose—and that the panorama itself encoded these forms. Consequently, Oettermann along with Michel Foucault linked the panorama to Jeremy Bentham’s almost contemporaneous invention of the panopticon (the word *panoptic* also translates as all-seeing), a circular prison with a tower at its center designed for the constant surveillance of inmates.\(^3\) In the panopticon, inmates were subject to an anonymous authority, “the eye of power” or “sovereign gaze,” as Foucault called it, that emanated from the tower. The sovereign gaze represented a new equation between vision and power—power that now aspired to total domination. The panorama embodied a similar ambition. In the panorama, the world is presented as a form of totality; nothing seems hidden; the spectator, looking down upon a vast scene from its center, appears to preside over all visibility.\(^3\)

This analysis leads to what might be called the *panoramic* or *panoptic sublime.* Having reached the topmost point in an optical hierarchy, the visitor experienced a sudden access of power, a dizzying sense of having suddenly come into possession of a terrain stretching as far as the eye could see. The ascent of a panorama tower as part of what might be called the panorama ritual was in this respect a stunning metaphor for social aspiration and social dominance. The multiple displacements involved—the way in which social meanings were projected onto the panorama painting; were absorbed into the forms of the painting; were often quite literally naturalized—should obscure neither the historic roots nor the historical specificity of the process. To the visitor the panoptic sublime was primarily a matter of vision; however, it was something else as well. The panoptic sublime drew its explosive energy from prevailing ideologies in which the exercise of power and the maintenance of social order required vision and supervision, foresight and, especially, oversight—a word equally applicable to panoramic views and to the operation of the reformed social institutions of the period: the prison, the hospital, the school, and the factory.

Oettermann and Foucault demonstrated that the panorama and the panopticon represent an aspect of modernization. Panoptic vision was intimately bound up with maintaining social hierarchies and disciplining a potentially rebellious, or at least recalcitrant, working class. Symptomatically, the initial idea for the panopticon came from Jeremy Bentham’s brother Samuel, an industrial engineer in Russia and England, who during the 1780s planned a

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\(^3\) See Oettermann (5-47); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (195-228, 317, n. 4) & “The Eye of Power.” Foucault speculates that Bentham may have been inspired by Barker’s panorama but Bentham’s own account seems to preclude this (see also Bentham; Evans)

\(^4\) It is impossible in a relatively short article to develop the historical bases for equations between vision and power in landscape painting although I would observe that the equation was never as abstract as it appears to be in Foucault’s writings. It should also be said that in landscape painting the equation evolves from an identity between sight or vision and land ownership to metaphorical forms in which landscape comes to signify “a well-constructed survey of the nation’s prospects” as seen through the eyes of an aristocratic elite (see also Turner, *Politics*; Fabricant).
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shipyard for St. Petersburg that would be built in the form of a panopticon (see Christie). Here we encounter, in a literal form, a fundamental connection between the factory and the prison. The panopticon symbolized the world of labor discipline as well as penal reform; the panorama, by contrast, was a form of middle-class entertainment. The relation between panopticon and panorama epitomizes the often-unremarked connection between work and leisure in capitalist society. In Bentham’s panopticon, a solitary guard or overseer hidden in a central tower, a representative of the modernizing bourgeois state, controls, visually, the inmate population while the means of violence needed to secure his authority remain as it were hidden in the wings. The panorama aestheticized an almost identical relation between subject and object. It offered the visitor the thrill of acquiring visual mastery – the panoptic sublime – but its object was not the inhabitant of a prison but a circular painting representing a landscape, a cityscape, or a battle scene. The visitor presided over the visual field and thus identified with the “eye of power” (Foucault) – in effect identifying with the viewpoint and interests of a newly ascendant bourgeois class. As a form of entertainment, panorama paintings appealed to an urban audience’s curiosity about faraway places, giving an expansive but also proprietary view of what was foreign. It furnished a similar view of the familiar. Londoners never seemed to tire of panoramic views of London as seen from the top of St. Paul’s Cathedral or, in Barker’s panorama, from Albion Mills, built in 1784 as the first of London’s first steam-powered grist mills and unforgettably described by William Blake as “dark Satanic mills” (see Hyde 57-89). Panoramas also featured battle scenes, which were especially popular during the Napoleonic Wars, and which needless to say, appealed to and reinforced patriotic sentiment.

3 The Rise of the Panoramic in the United States

Inhabiting the eye of power, the panopticon guard or panorama visitor’s relation to ‘reality’ was mediated by his or her identification with the power of the state. The panoramic mode in effect supported the state’s claim to stand over and above society as well as its claim to centrality in a world in which the distant and foreign fell under its purview. During the nineteenth century the panoramic mode became a key feature of bourgeois culture, and nowhere more so than in the United States, where landscape tourism, landscape literature, and landscape painting and photography augmented and reinforced a view of the world in which the state’s imperial agenda – seizing by force of arms nearly two-thirds of Mexico’s national territory, conquering the American west by displacing and annihilating Native American populations, ‘opening’ Japan – took on the appearance of inevitability.

Barker’s London panorama proved an immediate sensation and the panorama soon became a familiar form of popular entertainment not only in England, but also in France and the United States. The first American panorama
A panorama appeared in New York in 1795, only a year after Barker opened his Leicester Square rotunda. During the first half of the nineteenth century, panorama paintings were to be seen in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Charleston, New Bedford, and New Orleans. The history painter John Vanderlyn opened a rotunda in New York in 1818 with a panorama painting of Versailles. In 1837, Frederick Catherwood, today mainly remembered for his later travels to the Yucatan to record the remains of Mayan civilization, built a wooden panorama rotunda in New York City modeled on Barker’s in Leicester Square. There he exhibited panoramas of Jerusalem, Thebes, Balbec, Lima, Rome, the Bay Islands of New Zealand, and Niagara Falls, until a fire, in July 1842, put him out of business.

Although in the United States actual panoramas were relatively few and far between, at least compared to what one writer described as the “Panorama-mania” that swept London in the early years of the nineteenth century, panoramic vision virtually defined American landscape tourism during the period 1800-1870. The panoramic played a parallel role in American landscape literature, and was the principal feature of Hudson River School landscape painting - or rather, as we shall see, Hudson River School painters developed the artistic means to represent on two-dimensional canvases the three-dimensional experience of panoramic vision. In what follows, I consider in order landscape tourism, landscape literature, and landscape painting.

Beginning in the 1820s, American and foreign sightseers, following what was soon to become a standard landscape tour of the northeastern United States, climbed Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts and Mount Washington in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. They visited the Catskill Mountain House, perched on a high cliff, where on a clear day they could take in a stunning, panoramic vista of the Hudson Valley (see Van Zandt; Myers). They traveled to Niagara Falls, where the Terrapin Tower, built in the late 1820s, in effect functioned like the tower in a panorama rotunda, allowing visitors to view the falls and the surrounding terrain as one vast natural panorama (see Adamson, ed.; McKinsey). Indeed, towers became – and continue to be – a frequent feature of American landscape tourism. For example, around the year 1810, Daniel Wadsworth, a Hartford financier, patron of the arts, and amateur landscape painter, built an estate on the summit of Talcott Mountain six miles west of Hartford. Tellingly, he named his estate Monte Video (mount of vision). Monte Video had its gardens, boathouse, icehouse, tenant farmer and working farm, but the feature that drew landscape tourists was a fifty-five foot viewing tower located near the mountain’s summit. From the tower, a sightseer could take in a panoramic view of the Connecti-

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5 For a history of the panorama in the United States, see Avery ("The Panorama" passim).
6 For early landscape tourism, see Sears’s study Sacred Places, American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century (1988). For the White Mountains, see Brown and Keyes et al. For Mount Holyoke tourism, see Doezema; George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum; Graci.
cut Valley extending forty-five miles in all directions (see Wallach, “Wadsworth’s Tower”).

At Monte Video and other designated touristic sites, tourists replicated the panorama ritual. Here, for example, is the painter Thomas Cole in a letter of 1827 describing to his patron Daniel Wadsworth his ascent of Red Mountain in New Hampshire:

I climbed [Cole wrote] without looking on either side [in other words, as if he were climbing the tower of a panorama]: I denied myself that pleasure so that the full effect of the scene might be experienced – Standing on the topmost rock I looked abroad! – With what an ocean of beauty, and magnificence, was I surrounded.7

Cole was twenty-six when he penned his letter to Wadsworth and he had yet to visit an actual panorama; but he had already been to the Catskill Mountain House and had climbed Wadsworth’s tower at Monte Video. Confronting the ascent of Red Mountain, he knew precisely how to experience a mountaintop view.

Cole had also read James Fenimore Cooper’s Pioneers, America’s first best-selling novel. It contains a remarkable passage celebrating the panoramic vision.

I have traveled the woods for fifty-three years [says Natty Bumppo] and have made them my home for more than forty; and I can say that I have met but one place that was more to my liking; and that was only to eyesight, and not for hunting or fishing. […] There is a place in [the Catskills] that I used to climb to when I wanted to see the carryings on of the world, that would well pay any man for a barked shin or a torn moccasin. […] [T]he place I mean is next to the river, where one of the ridges juts out a little from the rest, and where the rocks fall, for the best part of a thousand feet, so much up and down. [Natty’s companion asks:] “What see you when you get there?” […] “Creation,” said Natty, […] sweeping one hand around him in a circle: “all creation.” (Cooper 279) 8

Natty’s gesture evokes nothing so much as the experience of a panorama. The place he is describing is good “only to eyesight,” but it is also his favorite place in the world, for it is here he can experience totality. Whatever the actual limitations of the scene, he sees nothing less than “all creation.”

Natty described an actual place known as the Pine Orchard, which is located on the Catskill escarpment not far from the village of Catskill. In 1824, a year after the publication of The Pioneers, a local entrepreneur opened the Catskill Mountain House at the Pine Orchard. It was the United States’ first landscape resort and for several decades its most fashionable hotel (see Van Zandt).

7 Thomas Cole to Daniel Wadsworth, August 4, 1827. Qtd. in McNulty, ed. (10-11).
8 The passage adumbrates similar passages in later works of American fiction, most notably, perhaps, in Hawthorne’s Marble Faun.
4 “The Panoramic School”

Scholars have often called Thomas Cole the ‘father’ of the Hudson River School of landscape painting. Born in 1801 in Lancashire, the heart of the English industrial revolution, Cole immigrated with his family to the United States in 1818. Seven years later, he achieved a stunning success with three paintings of scenes in the vicinity of the newly opened Catskill Mountain House. Acclaimed at twenty-four as the United States’ premier landscape painter, his career somewhat followed the expansion of landscape tourism.

Cole’s success depended, in large measure, upon his mastery of the conventions of Anglo-American landscape painting. For example, *Niagara Falls* (fig. 1), a painting he executed in 1829, is almost a textbook example of the prospect convention: Cole situates the viewer on the American side of the Niagara River looking south toward the American and Horseshoe Falls. He places the tiny figures of two Native Americans on a small rocky promontory in the foreground to the left (like many of his early landscapes, *Niagara* is cast in a Cooperesque historical past tense). The eye moves along a diagonal from the promontory to the tree-covered slopes on the Canadian side of the Niagara River, to the falls in the distance, to the black and gray rain clouds above the falls, and finally to a patch of light blue sky surrounded with white and gray clouds tinged pink by the setting sun.

Yet, if in the early years of his career Cole invariably employed established landscape painting conventions, he was also aware of the inadequacy of the representational formulae he used when it came to representing the experience of contemporary landscape tourists. He had experienced the American landscape as a panorama at the Catskill Mountain House, at Monte Video, and at Red Mountain. Traveling to London in 1829 (he remained there for two years), he very likely visited Thomas Horner’s London panorama, which opened the same year. By the time Cole reached Italy in 1831 he had worked out a plan to make drawings for a panorama of the Bay of Naples. The Neapolitan authorities worried that the artist’s interest was not in painting but in diagramming the harbor’s fortifications, put an end to his project. Still, he had by then begun to wrestle with the problem of representing the panoramic on the two-dimensional surface of the canvas. He started to fill his sketchbook with drawings in an extended rectangular shape. Very soon the

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9 During the 1870s, as the name ‘Hudson River School’ was gaining currency, members of a younger generation of artists also toyed with such names as ‘panoramic school,’ ‘Rocky Mountain period,’ and ‘Fogies.’ Each had its own particular sting; “panoramic school,” which was first used in 1876, represents a backhanded acknowledgment of the centrality of the panoramic for American landscape painting of the preceding decades (see Avery, “A Historiography of the Hudson River School” 5).

10 For a biographical summary and a critical account of Cole’s early success in New York, see Wallach, “Thomas Cole and the Course of American Empire” (23-28).
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elongated rectangle became an all-purpose format, a signifier for Cole and for later American artists for the panoramic.11

In 1833, shortly after his return to the United States, Cole made a panoramic drawing of the famous view from the summit of Mount Holyoke in Northampton, Massachusetts. Three years later, working from the drawing, he executed what later became his most famous painting: View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, After a Thunderstorm (fig. 2), today usually called The Oxbow. Cole’s sketch of the view from Mount Holyoke has a width-to-height ratio of approximately twenty-two to seven (for the two-page spread). For the finished painting, the artist stuck to a more traditional—and more saleable—format with a width-to-height ratio of approximately ten and three-tenths to seven. Nonetheless The Oxbow enlarges the angle of vision. Instead of producing a view involving a ‘normal’ angle of vision of about fifty-five degrees, Cole manipulated The Oxbow’s composition in such a way that it appears to take in approximately 85 or 90 degrees (as opposed to the 110 degrees of the 1833 sketch). This effect is achieved by a tight juxtaposition of what are almost two separate views, the stormy prospect to the left, and the sunlit vista to the right. This split composition, with its abrupt transitions from left to right and from foreground to background, leads to a divi-

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11 For a detailed account of Cole’s adoption of the elongated rectangular format and his attempts to simulate panoramic vision, see Wallach, “Making a Picture” (passim).
sion or bifurcation of seeing. Cole represents the equivalent of a section of a panorama without the panorama’s consistent and apparently seamless transition from point to point within the visual field. Instead, two related vistas are compressed or jammed against each other, so that a viewer scanning the landscape experiences both a feeling of panoramic breadth and a sense of imminent split or breakdown. There is, in other words, a spatial conflict in *The Oxbow* in which contradictory perspectives and modes of seeing, along with other sets of visual and symbolic oppositions – storm and sunshine, wilderness and pastoral landscape (the proverbial ‘Garden’) – produce a type of optical excitement, a cacophony of vision that can be taken as the pictorial equivalent to the exhilaration of the panoptic sublime.

As an early experiment in the panoramic mode of representation, Cole’s *Oxbow* anticipated much that was to come later. By the 1850s, leading American landscape painters were beginning to abandon canvases proportioned according to the traditional golden section (a width-to-height ratio of 1.6:1) and instead resorted to elongated rectangular formats (2:1, 2.5:1, 3:1) that were themselves signifiers for the panoramic. Telescopes and viewing tubes allowed viewers to experience a heightened sense of visual control by alternating between panoramic breadth and telescopic detail – a dialectic already present in the panopticon and early panorama. By the late 1850s, the panoramic mode became the defining feature of American landscape painting. We
encounter it in popular, mainstream works, such as Frederic Church’s *Niagara* (fig. 3) which sparked a sensation when it was exhibited in the United States and England in the late 1850s. We also see it in much smaller paintings by so-called ‘luminist’ artists, for example in John Kensett’s *View from Cozzens Hotel* (fig. 4).

Church’s *Niagara* was probably the most famous American painting of the nineteenth century. Displayed theatrically in a darkened room with gas jets focusing light on it, the painting demonstrated the artist’s unparalleled ability to engender belief in the reality and immediacy of the scene represented.\(^{12}\) Seeing the painting for the first time, the influential English critic John Ruskin needed to reassure himself that the rainbow was painted and not a projection. Soon thereafter he pronounced Church heir to Turner’s mantle as the world’s leading landscapist.\(^{13}\) When *Niagara* was exhibited at the 1867 Exposition Universelle, it won the admiration of the slickest of contemporary French academic painters, Jean-Léon Gérôme, who saw in Church’s painting the propitious beginnings of an American School: “ça commence là-bass,” he is reported to have said.\(^{14}\)

*Niagara* celebrated the United States’ most famous tourist attraction. Yet it also equated American identity with the panoramic or panoptic mode of vision. Representations of visual domination went hand-in-hand with American expansionism and imperial aspirations. Two years after he triumphed with *Niagara*, Church exhibited in New York his *Heart of the Andes*, derived from sketches the artist had made on his two trips to South America. *Heart of the Andes* made explicit the implicit equation between the visual and the political. In the age of Manifest Destiny, when American ruling elites dreamt of expanding American power throughout the Western Hemisphere, *Heart of the Andes* gave symbolic form to their aspirations. Shown in 1864 at New York’s Metropolitan Sanitary Fair – the fair was held to raise funds for wounded Civil War soldiers – surmounted by Gilbert Stuart’s portraits of the first three presidents, it figured symbolically the country’s past and future, its revolutionary origins and its postwar prospects.\(^{15}\)

Church depicted, among other subjects, South American volcanoes, Central American rain forests, and Arctic icebergs. His art epitomized American expansiveness. Other Hudson River School landscapists attempted to outdo him. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, Albert Bierstadt produced monumental canvases representing the Rocky Mountains and Yosemite (see Anderson

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\(^{12}\) Details of the painting’s actual presentation in New York are so far unknown. Kevin Avery, who has written extensively on the way in which Church’s *Heart of the Andes* was exhibited in New York in 1859, observes that in London *Niagara* was shown in a darkened room and illuminated by gas jets, and concludes that it probably was presented in the same dramatic, panorama-like fashion in New York (see Avery, “The Heart of the Andes” 52-72 & “The Panorama” 276-76, 354-35, n.8).

\(^{13}\) For Church and Ruskin, see McKinsey (243-44).

\(^{14}\) “It’s beginning there.” Qtd. in Huntington (4).

\(^{15}\) For *Heart of the Andes*, see Spassky et al (269-75).
Thomas Moran, an American follower of Turner, created even larger works. In the early 1870s, his vast panoramas, The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone and The Chasm of the Colorado (each painting measures 9.3 by 5.4 meters) were bought by Congress and displayed in the Capitol rotunda, as if to symbolize the nation’s conquest of its western territories (see Kinsey). Yet their success was short lived. By the late 1870s, the Hudson River School was falling out of fashion. Cole, Church, Bierstadt, and Moran had produced art for popular audiences – work that drew an equation between American iden-
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The Persistence of the Panoramic vision. However, in the years immediately following the Civil War, as the American upper class increasingly institutionalized distinctions between fine or high and low or popular art, the work of the Hudson River School artists began to look vulgar and old fashioned. After the 1870s, representations of the panoramic became almost exclusively the domain of the producers of popular culture.

Actual panoramas remained popular during the post-Civil War period – and in a variety of forms they continue to have an impact. For example, in the early 1880s, the French panorama artist Paul Philippoteaux and a team of assistants created three “cycloramas” depicting the battle of Gettysburg. Two survive. One, now on view at the Gettysburg National Military Park, was recently restored. It measures 13 meters tall, 115 meters in circumference, and weighs 11,364 kilograms. It depicts Pickett’s charge, the “High Water Mark of the Confederacy” and the climactic moment of the most important battle of the Civil War – a battle in which 166,000 soldiers participated and 51,000 died or were wounded. In 1884, Philippoteaux’s cyclorama was advertised as a “sublime spectacle” presenting “glorious Gettysburg in all the awful splendor of real war.”

Today, two million tourists visit the Gettysburg National Military Park and a large percentage of them experience “the awful splendor of real war.”

The division in the 1870s and 1880s between high and popular art resulted in part from disputes over verisimilitude. Should a work of art produce an illusion of reality? Or should it be the occasion for more refined, or as it were more aestheticized, forms of enjoyment? The panorama, as we have seen, involved a series of powerful trompe-l’oeil effects. And among the leading painters of the Hudson River School – especially Church and Bierstadt – representing the Real was the object of a sort of entrepreneurial competition.

If we compare a detail of Cole’s Oxbow of 1836 with a detail of Church’s Niagara of 1857, we immediately observe that Cole had little interest in concealing his brush strokes while with Church it is generally impossible to discern his touch without the aid of a magnifying glass. Church took photography as his model of representational truth and consequently his paintings can be interpreted as efforts to embody an impersonal or as it were photographic ideal of objectivity in which the artist toils heroically to eliminate from the surface of the canvas all traces of the labor involved in producing an image. The result is a slick or licked surface that signals transparency but also results in a hard and rather shiny effect in the foreground. This highly refined surface technique also allowed the artist an unprecedented degree of control over tonal effects. Church seems to have had at his disposal an infinite range of hues, values, and intensities, and thus through the subtle ma-

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16 For basic facts about the Gettysburg Cyclorama, see Greatest Work; Heiser; Oettermann (342-344); Renner.
17 Poster from the 1880s, cited in Renner, op. cit.
nipulation of color he could produce, among other things, the illusion that was said to have confounded Ruskin.

The Hudson River School’s emphasis on photographic verisimilitude anticipated a succession of technological innovations associated with the panoramic: not only panoramic photography, which dates to the 1850s, but also innovations that marked the evolution of photographic, film, and television technology. When it came to film, almost every technical advance – sound in the mid 1920s, color in the late 1930s – was meant to appeal to a popular audience that put a premium upon seemingly life-like representations. Unsurprisingly, the panoramic played a central role in these commercially driven innovations.

Attempts to produce films in widescreen formats began in the 1920s. In the 1950s and early 1960s – decades in which Hollywood was desperate to find new ways to compete with the new medium of television – Cinerama enjoyed a short-lived success (see Belton 85-112; Carr and Hayes 11-40). Cinerama initially employed three 35 millimeter cameras to create an image with unprecedented detail and depth of field as well as a width-to-height ratio of 2.59:1. Several travelogues were produced to showcase the breathtaking effects that could be achieved with the new technology as well as one full-length feature, “How the West Was Won.” This 1962 film featured eight big-name stars of the period including James Stewart, Gregory Peck, John Wayne, and Debbie Reynolds. As might be expected, it equated westward expansion with a stupendous representation of the western landscape as panorama. However, Cinerama technology was expensive and cumbersome. Projection required complicated camera set-ups and specially constructed theaters and screens. Presentations were big ticket, reserved seats spectacles unlike films shown at local movie theaters. Thus when it came to developing further widescreen technologies, Hollywood opted for more commercially viable approaches. From 1953 to 1967, Cinemascope dominated. It employed anamorphic lenses to project a film image with a width-to-height ratio of 2.66:1 (later reduced to 2.37:1) comparable to the extended format of Cinera-

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18 Filmmakers were experimenting with wide film formats as early as the 1890s. By 1907, however, Edison’s 35 mm. film was made an international standard. During the 1920s major film studios in the United States, Italy, and France created wide gauge films for wide screen projection (see Carr & Hayes). John Belton’s Widescreen Cinema provides an insightful overview of the evolution of cinematic formats from the 1890s through the 1920s (12-51).

The Persistence of the Panoramic

The Robe (1953), a multi-million dollar Biblical epic, was the first film to be released in the Cinemascope format, with dozens following. Since the 1960s, Hollywood, in its quest for ever-more ‘real’ effects, has continued its effort to refine technologies of widescreen projection. With Cinemascope, the extended format, signaling panoramic vision, became standard in the 1960s. (In the 1990s digital and high definition television followed suit.) IMAX (Image Maximum), which produces an experience of total visual immersion, has in recent years increased in popularity despite its unwieldy technology (see Carr and Hayes 183-87; Wollen 10-45). Like Cinerama, IMAX films can only be shown in specially-built theaters: the screen, while having a conventional width-to-height of 1.44:1, can be as tall as eight stories. Because of the extraordinary sense of verisimilitude that can be achieved with the IMAX process, Christopher Nolan used IMAX cameras to film the action sequences in 2008’s smash hit, The Dark Knight. In early 2009, Warner Brothers released an IMAX version of the film.

Satellite photography represents the most recent addition to the list of panoptic innovations. Today anyone with access to the internet can view detailed satellite images of almost any place on earth – Brooklyn backyards, Golden Gate Park, downtown Baghdad, the house where you live. Satellite imagery produces, at least initially, something akin to the thrill of the panoptic sublime and thus tends to reinforce the viewer’s identification with a dominant power.

Coda

The pairing of panorama and panopticon underscore the close relationship between panoramic vision and what might be called the aesthetics of surveillance. If today we view with pleasure a satellite photograph, it is almost impossible to forget that satellite photography has its origins in the militarization of space. Similarly, if the panorama and panopticon once produced the fantasy or illusion of an omniscient and omnipresent state, new surveillance technologies, in particular closed circuit television (CCTV), constitute a fur-

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ther realization of the state’s monstrous aspiration to omniscience and omnipresence.22

As we observed at the outset, the panorama prompted viewers to identify with ‘the eye of power.’ Because the panoramic now pervades American culture, that identification has become habitual, reflexive, unconscious, and seemingly innocent. Most of us have paid a visit to the scenic overlook. Yet, as the United States increasingly becomes a carceral society, with 2.3 million, or 751 out of every 100,000, Americans now in prison,23 and as the state becomes more and more obsessed with terrorism and ‘homeland’ security, Americans find themselves caught between the position of viewer and viewed, of subject and object. If representations of the world as ‘panorama’ inspire Americans to identify with regimes of surveillance, being the object of surveillance, as we increasingly find ourselves, leads to a different response. The former implies a politics of complacency, the latter, a politics of resistance.

22 See Clive Norris’s and Gary Armstrong’s study The Maximum Surveillance Society: The Rise of CCTV (1999). This book mainly concerns the use of CCTV in the United Kingdom, but its analyses apply to the United States and other countries where CCTV is becoming a commonplace feature of everyday life.

23 Statistics for the United States prison population are widely available. For a useful discussion as well as a summary of the data, see Liptak.
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