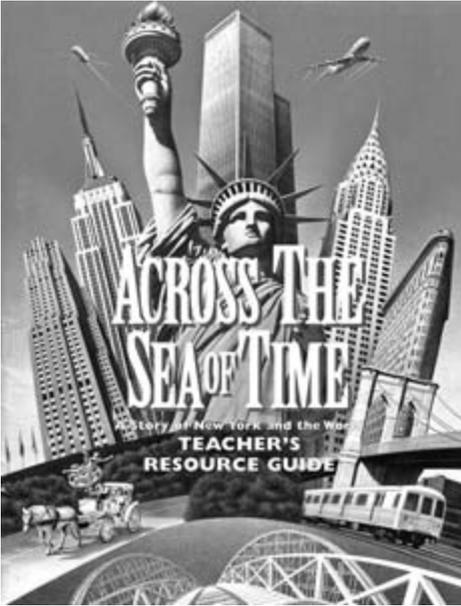




technologies—which, despite their modest scale and resolution, promise immersive experiences and virtual travel in similar ways to IMAX).<sup>2</sup> In both a literal and chimerical sense, each of these representational forms latches on to the idea of travel undergirding a variety of non-fictional subjects delivered with heightened verisimilitude. Leery of espousing a Bazinian teleology in which IMAX appears as the culmination of a centuries-long project of perfect filmic illusionism, a more nuanced approach is required that acknowledges IMAX's complex legacy and situates it within a long history of spectacular, large-scale image making. The IMAX experience is a historically constructed one, indebted to centuries-old attempts at making illusionist and spectacular representations, with each precursor embedded in diverse and sometimes contradictory impulses.

With this in mind, my aim in this essay is to scrutinize IMAX's reliance on the travelogue as its key structuring principle. Methodologically, this essay tempers somewhat abstract ideas about IMAX, travel, and human perception derived from cultural theory with more historically grounded trade and popular-press discourses concerning the large-screen cinematic format. I'm interested here in examining how motion itself—the kinetic impulse defining travel—is textually inscribed in IMAX via the phantom ride (camera located on the front of a moving object such as a plane, train, or vehicle); the organization of our perception via shot composition, scale, and duration; and the presence (or absence) of the pan as camera movement. Through an analysis of the visual grammar of *Across the Sea of Time* (1996) and *Everest* (1998), I hope to suggest how our attention as spectators is uniquely shaped by the idiom of IMAX. As exemplary IMAX travelogues, and in the case of *Sea of Time*, a film redolent with reflexive meaning about the nature of 3-D imaging and immigration as an assimilationist journey, these films tell us a great deal about why IMAX seems so bound to the travelogue and how ideas of travel/mobility/kinesis play out on several discursive levels (Figure 1).

However, rather than make the case that IMAX simply exploits an aged visual rhetoric and trope in a souped-up medium of ostentation (the teleological idea of IMAX films as technologically enhanced versions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century panoramic paintings), I want to analyze sequences from *Sea of Time* and *Everest* that may advance our theoretical understanding of “panoramic perception” and how, paradoxically, it is more likely to be suppressed than showcased in IMAX films. In other words, while the popularity of the expansive IMAX screen suggests an en-



1 Cover of a teacher's resource guide to *Across the Sea of Time* (1995). Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

during fascination with panoramic vision, in this case the ability to make use of our peripheral vision, giving us closer to a 250-degree (as opposed to the presumed 180-degree) visual span of the world surrounding us, most IMAX films eschew the pan's horizontality in favor of a perpendicular movement into the frame that evokes the sensation of penetrating space through depth cues. Panoramic vision no longer refers to a lateral sweep associated with the cinematic pan but functions more as a synonym for an overall view; as Sören Pold explains, "to a large extent [the panorama has] become naturalized as a general aestheticization of perception and urbanity" (2001: 54). This repression of panoramic perception is clearly linked to the absence of a classical Renaissance perspective in a great many sequences in IMAX films; iconographically, we read the IMAX image quite differently from conventional 35mm, scanning it vertically for detail and meaning rather than panoramically from left to right.

IMAX uses 15-perforation, 70mm film to shoot and project images of incredible sharpness. The 15/70 frame is ten times larger than the 35mm used in regular theaters and three times larger than standard 70mm film

used in classic Hollywood epics.<sup>3</sup> In most IMAX films, panoramic vision is isomorphic with an omniscient gaze, a visibility of surveillance that comes from aerial cinematography and sweeping crane shots (a classic IMAX film like *To Fly* [1976] can be considered the ur-IMAX film, since its visual rhetoric is composed of little else than that simulated movement through space). A question to be explored in this essay, then, is how IMAX directors foreground depth perception in their films, a technique anticipated in nineteenth-century panorama painters' use of perspective drawing and *faux terrains* (use of props such as real grass in theatricalized, artificially arranged three-dimensional foregrounds) to underscore the illusion of depth on the grand panoramic canvases. By focusing on just two IMAX films that appropriate the travelogue as a structuring principle, I hope to generate a more theoretically informed and mutually informing body of knowledge about travel and large-format filmmaking. In the case of *Everest*, I am interested in locating ruptures in the representational architecture of IMAX, ways in which the form struggles to enunciate when dealing with the small, the fleeting, and the intimate. IMAX's complicity in constructing a monolithic, ethnocentric grand-narrative of Western supremacy is also explored in the final section here.

### Journeys on the (Very) Big Screen

Imax made its mark by taking people where they couldn't go themselves. To the top of Everest or to the bottom of the ocean.—Richard Gelfond

To characterize IMAX as virtual travel or armchair tourism is something of a truism today. It is trotted out in IMAX film publicity and echoed by film critics in countless reviews. Audiences have come to expect an element of travel as a quintessential component of the entire IMAX package; for those baby-boomers old enough to remember Cinerama, “fabulous travelogues and natural-history essays that combine the earnest, predigested scholarship of a National Geographic piece with the excitement of a roller-coaster ride,” in the words of one critic, IMAX simply ups the ante in terms of technological prowess and sensation delivery (Canby 1998: 18). The idea of the travelogue informs both traditional IMAX nature documentaries exploring a specific landscape and recent IMAX teen-themed films for audiences seeking a higher than usual quotient of special effects in what is increasingly a videogame-looking interface. IMAX

producers now even look beyond our terrestrial world for suitable large-format subject matter, announcing a 3-D IMAX film entitled *Magnificent Desolation* that will give viewers the sensation of visiting the moon, narrated by *Apollo 13* star Tom Hanks (Dunkley 2003).

The semantics of travel thus imbues everything about the IMAX Corporation, from the imperialist overtones of its recent expansion in China, India, and Eastern Europe, to the active prepositions prevalent in its titles (*Across the Sea of Time*, *Into the Deep*, and *Up Kilimanjaro*, to cite just a few examples), to the trademark phantom ride shot mentioned earlier (Acland 1998). IMAX's interest in the travelogue has not been limited to 2- and 3-D films; they have branched out into *Back to the Future*-type simulation rides such as the IMAX Magic Carpet ride (Schwartzberg 1993: 42), which has two projectors running synchronously, one in front of the audience and the other projecting images through a transparent floor (for more on simulation rides, see Lauren Rabinovitz's essay in this collection). Some IMAX films, such as the Belgian director Ben Stassen's *Haunted Castle* (2001), make the obligatory IMAX phantom ride the centerpiece of the film, although in the absence of any character development or dramatic situations, the entire film is little more than a "special-effects demo," as one critic put it (Zoller 2001: 38). The phantom ride reached ever-dizzying speeds in spring 2004, when the co-produced IMAX/Warner Brothers film *NASCAR: The IMAX Experience*, placed spectators in the driving seat to experience speeds of more than two hundred miles per hour (*PR Newswire* 2003c).

One of the most obvious reasons that IMAX films rely so heavily on the travelogue format is the educational market that has been carved out for IMAX (or that IMAX carved out for itself): traditional nature documentaries. IMAX films are expository texts that, while not conforming exactly to John Grierson's vision of documentary film as an art/propaganda symbiosis that inculcates heightened social awareness and civic responsibility in the viewer, nevertheless contain a didactic element befitting the school-group audience that makes up a significant percentage of receipts in non-commercial venues (of the 150 or so IMAX screens in the United States, approximately half are located in science and natural history museums, while the others are in multiplexes or purpose-built venues) and in commercial venues during the day when the theaters are traditionally empty (Gardner 1999). IMAX has clearly found a niche audience in the museum, where the recent trend of blockbuster or gimmick-driven shows—the Godiva-underwritten "Chocolate" exhibit at the American Museum

of Natural History in spring 2003 is a litmus test of the current reach of commercial interests into the museum, with free Godiva chocolates served in the “Chocolate Factory” and a satellite shop at the end of the exhibit full of expensive chocolate and chocolate-related kitsch including the 1998 movie *Chocolat*—no longer seems to raise an eyebrow from the museum-going public; in fact, demand for these shows is largely audience driven. But as Charles Acland points out, IMAX and the museum are co-conspirators in the discursive work performed on visitors as they enter the museum space and are subject to the similar disciplinary regimes of the institutional space and its motion picture corollary: “To adopt the Imax gaze is to find oneself firmly interpellated into an epistemological purview that covers both the museum and new entertainment technologies” (1998: 435).

However, it was IMAX’s legacy as a museum-based educational resource that made Hollywood executives skeptical of the commercial appeal of the technology, especially 3-D IMAX, which required an image make-over with audiences who associated 3-D with gimmicky 1950s B movies. Hollywood interest in large-format films grew in the mid-1990s, especially after the colossal success of *Everest*, which earned \$91 million at the box office. Aside from scouting out ever more lucrative locations for IMAX theaters, the company has recently set in motion its most ambitious commercial proposal to date. In an effort to avert the feared saturation of its traditional museum venue and nature documentary formats, IMAX is hedging its bets on its proprietary digital remastering technology (DMR), which allows conventionally shot 35mm “Hollywood event” films to be converted into a 70mm format for a cost of \$2–4 million. The strategy seems to have been successful so far; 2002 was the company’s first profitable year since 1999, with \$11.5 million in fourth-quarter profits versus \$6.6 million in 2001; there are currently more than 225 IMAX theaters in thirty countries. The IMAX version of *The Matrix: Reloaded* (2003) began playing in theaters shortly after its 15 May 2003, release and the final film in the trilogy, *The Matrix Revolutions*, was the first-ever simultaneously released 35mm/IMAX Hollywood movie when it opened on 7 November 2003 (*PR Newswire* 2003a). Quelling fears that audiences would not pay more for the “premium” experience—research suggests audiences will not only pay the additional three to four dollars for IMAX versions of films but will also travel more than twenty miles for the experience—IMAX is hoping that a recently acquired venue at the Paris EuroDisney will be a central showcase for IMAX films (Hernandez 2003; *PR News-*

wire 2003b). Finally, IMAX has demonstrated considerable growth in its lineup of international theater signings and installations (signings almost doubled from twelve in 2001 to twenty-one in 2003), with China slated to become the second-largest IMAX market in the world (*Toronto Ontario Star* 2003: EO6).

What is interesting about these recent developments is that they mark a shift in IMAX's conflicted identity as the purveyor of visual spectacle on the one hand and dramatic narrative on the other; as the *New York Times* critic Peter Nichols characterized it: "Large screen lends itself to the spectacle, which in turn calls for dazzling clarity and stupendous sound . . . Dramatic scenarios are often not effective with audiences conditioned to seeing roller coaster rides, bounding lions, 40ft waves and crashing avalanches" (1993: E3). Repurposing has presented IMAX with a way out of the education and museum market ghetto, which, while profitable, is a niche market that IMAX wishes to transcend. The fact that most new IMAX theaters are being constructed in shopping malls (aka "destination complexes") rather than in museums is appealing to Hollywood studios, who until recently maintained a wait-and-see attitude with regard to releasing their product in IMAX format (McDowell 1996).

But if the bond between nonfiction and the large-screen medium seems unlikely to be seriously challenged by IMAX's repurposing of standard Hollywood features, it in no small part owes to the legacy of early cinema, which not only created the conditions of possibility for large-screen projection (widescreen emerged as a way of skirting Edison's copyright patents) but created the perfect promotional vehicle for the representation of landscapes (Nichols 1993: E3; also see Cahn 1996). Viewed in this context, it is no surprise that promoters of Cinerama looked to the turn-of-the-century travelogues of Burton Holmes and Lyman Howe as models for their mid-twentieth-century enhanced cinematic technology, or that IMAX, too, should turn to the same genre, especially landscape films, as an obvious aesthetic model (see Belton 1992: 91-94). Premiering on 30 September 1952, Cinerama was a novelty few audience members had previously experienced; in Belton's words, "The frame of the theater proscenium seemed to disappear, and the audience had the uncanny sensation of entering into the events depicted on the curved screen in front and to the side of them" (1-2). *This Is Cinerama* (1952) took spectators on a virtual tour of Europe in the first half followed by the United States after the intermission; *Cinerama Holiday* (1955) juxtaposed a European couple's tour of America with an American couple's vacation to Europe

(Belton 1992: 89–90). Not surprisingly, these films were heavily nationalistic in tone, fetishizing the American landscape “as an index of technological prowess,” and in the process becoming “an unlikely participant in the Cold War” (Belton 1992: 89–90). A similar nationalist fervor marks *To Fly*, among the first IMAX films ever made, produced as part of the 1976 Smithsonian Bicentennial celebrations. The film links issues of national identity to technological developments in aviation through meta-narratives of American progress and domination in flight technology. Many IMAX films address the nation as an “imagined community,” hailing spectators as proud consumers of images whose verisimilitude, it would seem, could be vouched for by the putative power of the nation itself, as an invisible sponsor of these epic undertakings; *The Last Buffalo* is another good example (Johnson and Goldner 1997: 5). But in constructing this national imaginary IMAX is simply following in the footsteps of earlier large-format imaging techniques such as the panorama and nineteenth-century landscape paintings of such artists as Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran (Miller 1993; Wilton and Barringer 2002). As a powerful symbol and nationalist allegory, the urban landscape functions as a potent icon, as we will see in the ensuing analysis of *Across the Sea of Time*.

### Seeing Time Three Dimensionally: The Man with a Stereoscope

*Across the Sea of Time* (1996), produced and directed by Stephen Low, son of IMAX pioneer Colin Low, is a picaresque 3-D IMAX travelogue about an eleven-year-old Russian immigrant, Tomas Minton, who—in possession of little more than a stereoscope, stereocards, and faded letters sent by his great uncle Leopold Minton to his parents back home in Russia in the second decade of the twentieth century—comes to New York City to find his uncle’s surviving widow, Julia. A parable of the American dream and replete with tropes of American progress and assimilation (Neumann 2001: 113), the film is, according to the press packet, the “ultimate ‘New York Experience,’” a stopping point on 68th Street and Broadway, a few blocks north of the high-cultural mecca Lincoln Center, for contemporary tourists in search of a large-screen visual orientation to the city’s major sights. The tourists lining up to see *Across the Sea of Time* will doubtless identify with Leopold Minton, who, in 1908, began work-



2 Stereo photograph wx50, “Immigrants just getting off the boat,” used in the IMAX movie *Across the Sea of Time*. Courtesy of the Keystone-Mast Collection, UCR/California Museum of Photography, University of California-Riverside.

ing for a commercial stereoscope company making touristic 3-D images of the city; with fist-sized digital cameras tucked away in their bags, they, too, are image-makers intent on preserving a record of the city’s iconic splendor. And yet the materiality and tactility of Leopold’s images contrast sharply with the digitized photographs taken by modern tourists, and while both sets of images circulate in global image markets (digital photographs e-mailed to friends and family around the world; stereographs bought, sold, and traded across international borders, winding up in parlor sitting rooms after long, sometimes circuitous journeys across time and space), they are both the products of a technologically mediated tourist gaze.

Minton’s stereographs are vitally important visual elements in the film, which combines turn-of-the-century stereoscopic imagery with 1990s 70mm IMAX footage of New York City. Not only are the century-old stereographs blown up to enormous proportions on the 3-D IMAX screen but they trigger the film’s syntagmatic chains; the reading of a letter or loading of a stereocard into the stereograph functions as a roadmap for the film’s sequences and cues the appearance of the giant black-and-white stereocards (Figure 2). Leopold’s identity as an immigrant imagemaker serves as an important metatext: he is both a sightseer and a sightmaker, becoming a professional observer whose “new occupation extends the

city beyond its physical geography, carrying it to others who can witness its scenes in commodified stereograph images” (Neumann 2001: 115). But as Mark Neumann observes, Leopold’s journey is also one of assimilation, a process heightened by the ethnographer’s cloak he wears in his role as a commercial documentary-maker of a burgeoning city. There is a tangible tension, then, between the voyeurism apparent in Leopold’s attempts at acculturation and the transcendent ocularity of the IMAX camera, which transforms the intimacy of the private stereoscopic views into a seventy-five-foot-high spectacle. At one point he says: “I look into windows to see how Americans live” (a comment that finds symmetry in Tomas’s happening upon a topless woman sunbathing on a roof). *Across the Sea of Time* thus enacts a series of interesting reversals that point up the circuitous nature of global imagemaking and exhibition: stereocards made by Leopold for mass global consumption end up as fetishized images that now evince a very private, quiet power as they promise to unlock the secret to Tomas’s ancestral past. The interiority suggested by the private viewing conditions of the stereoscope is blown asunder when these same images become visual spectacle on the IMAX screen; and yet ironically, because we view them through 3-D goggles equipped with PSE’s (Personal Sound Environment), we still experience them as relatively privatized images.

In similar ways to Dziga Vertov in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), who climbs to the top of buildings and other modern structures to better visualize the city, Tomas scales rooftops to relive the stereoscopic images created by his great uncle (there is another possible homage to Vertov in the Central Park carriage tracking shot sequence that closely resembles the carriage scene from *Man with a Movie Camera*). Vertov’s kino-eye camera metaphor ironically finds new expression in the supra-mobile gaze of the IMAX camera, which in an aerial sequence sweeps down Manhattan’s major arteries and flies toward the spectacularly crowned financial district from Staten Island; indeed, Vertov’s belief that “I, a machine, am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see . . . My road leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world . . . I decipher, in a new way, a world unknown to you” (1984: 17–18) is elegantly rehearsed for us in the aerial photography scenes of *Across the Sea of Time* (and in the iconology of much IMAX footage in general), in what James Donald calls a “utopian will to visibility” shared by Vertov and Walter Benjamin (1995: 89).

Leopold’s and Tomas’s shared experiences of the city suggest a trans-

historical gaze, what Neumann calls the “panoramic vision of time,” that is cued by the action of Tomas panning the city landscape with the stereoscope (ironically, as Neumann points out, the stereoscope is used more as a telescopic device here, since the camera does not pan to follow the movement [2001: 115]). In most instances, past and present images of iconic sites are linked via a dissolve, a formal device that serves as an apt metaphor for the blurring of subjectivities across distinct temporalities. However, the issue of whose memories are being evoked here is somewhat opaque. For example, when Tomas closes his eyes and there is a dissolve from the contemporary *mise-en-scène* to the same historical location (or vice versa), it is unclear whether Tomas is somehow accessing Leopold’s memory of that place or whether this is what Tomas *himself* now sees. Simply being in the same physical space as Leopold, though separated by nearly a century of history, triggers a memory trace that Tomas is able to access via the stereographs and the letters; indeed, Tomas’s and Leopold’s subjectivities seem to merge at these moments of 3-D plenitude. The letters are double signifiers of sorts, since they represent both Leopold’s memory of experiencing a particular place *and* the reactivation or mediation of these memories via Tomas’s subjectivity when he reads them. Like that of any tourist, Tomas’s gaze is both what John Urry calls a “socially organized and systematized gaze” and one heavily inflected by personal memory and a strong psychic investment in the outcome of the pursuit of memory. The letters and slides thus trigger a metaphorical/existential “departure” for Tomas and the IMAX audience—a vital component of any touristic act—what Urry describes as a “limited breaking with established routines and practices of everyday life and allowing one’s senses to engage with a set of stimuli that contrast with the everyday and the mundane” (1990: 1–2). Sounding remarkably like an advertisement for IMAX, the idea of sensory simulation and immersion in both familiar and exotic locations clearly promises a substitute for actual tourism.

*Sea of Time* thus provides a fascinating metacommentary on the very idea of time travel through 3-D images, inviting spectators to step into the past in the same way as the panorama rotunda invited audiences to stand in the very middle of a vast, circular view; the use of turn-of-the-century stereoscope slides to showcase the late-twentieth-century technology of 3-D photography provides a compelling example of how the travelogue functions as a narrative glue, binding together old and new media. The stereocards provide a great deal of the emotional weight of the film, avoiding an overly sentimentalized look at the past that we often associate

with *The American Experience* or Burnsian documentaries. There's a raw quality to the images, produced in part by the magnified scale and 3-D, which has a powerful visceral effect on us; while the contemporary scenes emphasize movement through space—either flying over Manhattan in a helicopter or taking a phantom ride on a Coney Island roller-coaster or NYC subway car—the stereopticon photographs “hold a quieter power,” to quote Ricky Vanderknyff [n.d., unpaginated], and force us to contemplate the ontological properties of the black-and-white stereocards versus the color motion pictures. Striking in several of the black-and-white images is the return gaze of the subjects; one of the first stereocards shown in the film is of a large group of recently arrived male immigrants, many of whom are staring directly at the camera. The confrontation with history derives from several different optical effects at play in the image—the human face (each framed by a hat, worn by every single man in this stereocard) comes alive, the subjects seemingly staring back at us from a 3-D limbo. As Paul Arthur notes, this affective response comes from the scale of the projection: “With an unprecedented vividness of detail and illusion of full-bodied volume, they startle like ghosts. It is in the brief appearance of these long dead black-and-white-figures that the feeling of a shared space between screen and spectator, the impulse to reach out and make contact, is most acute” (1996: 79). Unlike the contemporary scenes that privilege motion over stasis, the stillness of the stereocards creates a heightened immersive sensation, the figures seemingly transcending the boundedness of the frame; as Vanderknyff notes, “with its immense scale . . . it's easy to feel one could walk into the scenes” (n.d., unpaginated). Unfortunately, the IMAX camera fails to linger long enough on each image to give us the necessary time to absorb the rich visual detail.

Without the stereocards, the film is, as Vanderknyff points out, “a big, moving postcard of New York” (n.d., unpaginated); but, as Arthur observes, the film “enhances its display of vertiginous postcard vistas and Coney Island roller coaster plunges with an assortment of sensory assaults . . . intent on mobilizing as wide a range of sense impressions as the urban environment will yield” (1996: 79). One of the ways the film accomplishes this is via the depth perception of the 3-D photography; the haptic quality of the image in both the stereocards and contemporary footage is enhanced through the layering of objects and the unexpected intrusion of a prop into the frontal plane, such as the sudden appearance of a huge chain in the immediate foreground in the second shot of the film in the boiler room of a Russian freighter bringing Tomas to



3 Stereo photograph x78459, “Man looking down onto Wall St.,” used in the IMAX movie *Across the Sea of Time*. Courtesy of the Keystone-Mast Collection, UCR/California Museum of Photography, University of California-Riverside.

New York, a wok suddenly erupting into flame in a Chinatown restaurant, and, also in Chinatown, fish swimming in a tank. As director Low points out in the press packet, “The trick is to have layers. The more visual cues for foreground, middle ground, and background the more effective the 3-D” (1996). In the same way that the phantom ride became the trademark 2-D IMAX motif, shots that are very deep and that appear to jump out of the screen have become the stock in trade of 3-D IMAX films (Figure 3). Ensuring the maximum effectiveness of the 3-D medium and avoiding the problems besetting the representation of human figures, which in close-up appear incredibly flat, “as if they’ve been steamrollered into the screen,” is no easy task.

The magical effect of these objects coming out of the frame into the space between spectator and screen recalls a much earlier optical illusion exploited by circular panorama painters who constructed faux terrains—the space between the viewing platform and circular canvas panoramas containing real artifacts which merged seamlessly with the painting—in order to heighten the illusionism of the image. The net effect is remarkably like viewing 3-D IMAX, an implicit parallel drawn by Vincent Canby when he wrote that “the images [in IMAX] are so brilliant and sharp that

you don't feel as if you're outside looking in. In some ways, it's like attending so-called 'live' theater. The eye is free to look wherever it wants. And, as much as the eye, the mind is engaged through sheer sensation" (1998: 18). Not only does the theatricality Canby alludes to remind us of the panorama's faux terrain but the visual autonomy he speaks of perfectly describes the spectatorial coordinates of panoramic viewing. And yet, the visual autonomy he discusses is radically undercut in the contemporary footage of *Sea of Time*, which rejects horizontal movement across the frame, the direction of panoramic vision around the circumference of the painting, in favor of lateral movement into the frame.

To compensate for the stasis of the blown-up stereocards in *Sea of Time* and to mimic the action of the spectator's eyes as they scan the image for detail, the camera gently directs our attention through panning and tilting, a technique in sharp contrast to the kinetic overload of much of the film's aerial photography, phantom ride, and tracking-shot footage in its contemporary sequences. While there is very little panning in the contemporary footage, the IMAX camera compensates for this by swooping down on locations and subjects, moving through space like a mechanized eagle (the canted camera angle is a standard IMAX trope causing audience members to concomitantly tilt their bodies). But what happens when the IMAX format is transported to a topography that, while sharing some traits with *Sea of Time* (the manmade monumentality of the urban landscape with its canyons and skyscrapers is replaced by a natural phenomenon), constructs a travelogue of quite different proportions?

### Screened Gigantism: IMAX on Mount Everest

Whereas we know the miniature as a spatial whole or as temporal parts, we know the gigantic only partially.—Susan Stewart

We told the story really beautifully. It was poetic; it wasn't just a male-dominated machismo testosterone drama.—Greg MacGillivray

A defining feature of early travel was the desire to survey the topography of the foreign land; as Judith Adler points out, travelers were advised to prepare for their tours by learning "something of maths, perspective, drawing, and map-making, and to carry instruments for measuring temperature, height, and distance" (1998: 15). Unquestionably male, the traveler-as-surveyor was the "monarch of all he sur-

veyed,” most often the son of an aristocrat, member of the landed gentry, or, by the end of the eighteenth century, the professional middle class (Pratt 1992: 201–27).<sup>4</sup> Between 1600 and 1800 the treatises on travel shifted from “a scholastic emphasis on touring as an opportunity for discourse, to travel as eyewitness observation” (Urry 1990: 4). The tourist gaze, a new way of seeing the world, coincided with the emergence of the nineteenth-century “Grand Tour,” which privileged a subjective, emotionally charged, and aestheticized appreciation of scenic beauty in general, and the sublime in particular (Urry 1990: 4).

Referring to the travelogue in the context of IMAX brings into relief a set of ideas about travel, tourism, and sightseeing, ideas shaped in turn by oppositions between activity versus passivity, fake versus authentic; and the hegemony of sight versus other sensory modalities. Travel as a discursive concept has been freed of its earlier privileged connotations—everyone is pretty much on the move today, what James Clifford refers to as “dwelling-in-travel” (1997: 2).

The cultural meanings of travel are still shaped to some extent by notions of mapping and surveillance, especially the idea of looking down upon a city and tourist destination, having conquered it through ascending space. So when tourists visit Coba in the Yucatán Peninsula, Mexico, they feel obliged to make the long trek up the side of the crumbling pyramid to survey the surrounding terrain; similarly, visits to New York City and Paris are deemed incomplete without ascending the Empire State Building and the Eiffel Tower. Ascending and conquering are thus tropes associated with travel and ones most certainly co-opted by IMAX in its iconography and camera work. Ironically, this impulse to survey from above is thwarted to a large extent in *Everest*, given the enormous effort involved in transporting and using the camera at such elevations.

Released in March 1998, *Everest* set a new standard for IMAX; with a budget of \$4.5 million, the film grossed \$58 million in just thirty-two weeks and over \$120.6 million by January 2003, making *Everest* the highest-grossing documentary and large-screen film of its time, breaking the record previously held by *To Fly*, which has netted over \$115.7 million since its 1976 release. How do we account for the phenomenal success of this film? Several issues are at stake. First, the film was able to capitalize on the enormous publicity surrounding the deaths of eight climbers on the face of Everest in May 1996 (as one of twelve other expeditions assembled on the mountain that spring, the IMAX team had the foresight—or good luck—to postpone their summit attempt until the storm had

passed and the near-gridlock climber back-up around Hillary's Step had dissipated). The deaths of fellow climbers imbues the IMAX film with a temporal specificity; this wasn't just *any* climbing season on Mount Everest but among the most memorable since the summit was first reached by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay Sherpa in 1953. While *Everest* conforms in many respects to a traditional travelogue, the publicity surrounding the deaths of the climbers drew into sharp relief questions about Everest's place in the political economy of Tibet, the ecological fallout from the rising numbers of summit attempts by for-profit multinational climbing organizations, and whether access to the mountain should be more tightly controlled by the Tibetan government.

Second, the film exploited a heightened public and trade-press fascination with the additional challenges of taking an IMAX camera to the "roof of the world." Even in the absence of human drama on Everest, the film was destined to generate a great deal of publicity, as Mark Singer, writing in *Sight and Sound* observed: "The sense of scale and detail large-format can offer—let alone the achievement of getting both onto the film in the first place—would be impressive even if nothing untoward happened" (1999: 26). This near-fetishizing of the IMAX process, particularly an obsession with the weight of the camera, size of the batteries, logistical challenges of filming in sub-zero temperatures, and huge support necessary to transport the equipment up the mountain, anthropomorphizes the technology, transforming the IMAX camera into a VIP that must make it up the mountain at all costs.<sup>5</sup> The technology in this instance is isomorphic with the subject matter; IMAX and Everest are both behemoths that swallow up their subjects, contain them, so to speak (what Susan Stewart refers to as being "enveloped by the gigantic, surrounded by it, enclosed within its shadow"; 1993: 74). There is little doubt that the IMAX screen enacts a similar enveloping process, since unlike the miniature, which can be held in a privatized, individual space, the gigantic presents "a physical world of disorder and disproportion." As a potent signifier of the gigantic, the sky is a recurring trope in tales of the gigantic, a "vast, undifferentiated space marked only by the constant movement of clouds with their amorphous forms" (Stewart 1993: 74). That the IMAX camera should take to the skies—in quite a literal sense—should come as no surprise, then, given the sky's close affinity with the vast and the sublime.

Tibetan culture in general, and the Sherpa industry in particular, is metonymically signified via Jamlin Tenzing Norgay, son of Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, following in his father's footsteps. Jamlin's spirituality and

desire to climb Everest are thus motivated by a sense of destiny (and no doubt an Oedipal drive); he becomes our entry point into this “mystical” culture, and yet even his bifurcated identity is subjected to the relentless fictionalizing effects of the narration, music, and graphics used in *Everest*. In complex and contradictory ways *Everest* evokes and suppresses the cultures and identities of Nepalese people who become travelers themselves in their role as Sherpa guides. As Clifford notes, “cultures and identities reckon with both local and transnational powers to an unprecedented degree” in the twentieth (and twenty-first) centuries: “Cultural action, the making and remaking of identities, takes place in the contact zones, along the policed and transgressive intercultural frontiers of nations, peoples, locales” (1997: 7). Nepalese culture is thus reified through a heavily Orientalist gaze, reduced to a series of stylized Hollywood-influenced ethnographic vignettes such as the reenactment scene in the Buddhist temple representing Jamlin Norgay as a little boy (an image we return to at the end the film when the young Norgay is surrounded by candles). The film’s attempt to evoke the spiritualism surrounding Everest is undercut by the marginalization of the Sherpa economy that supports mountaineering in the region (one is clearly more photogenic and easier to represent than the other). Not only are the Sherpas who are responsible for transporting the IMAX camera and equipment up Everest largely invisible in the film but their role in the monumental team effort necessary to make the film is marginalized. The Sherpas gain visibility only through a series of still photographs interpolated into the closing credits (the credit mentions the ten Sherpas who carried the IMAX equipment, but photographs of only four are shown). The implicit racism in this afterthought representation of the Sherpas is echoed in a comment made by the *American Cinematographer* writer Naomi Pfefferman when she reduces Sherpas to little more than necessary equipment: “As it turned out, Sherpas, camera, and batteries performed ‘flawlessly’ as the crew traveled up to 12 miles a day” (1995: 36). *Everest* is not the only large-format film guilty of a Eurocentric gaze; according to Acland, *Grand Canyon: The Hidden Secrets* (1984) constructs a “colonialist and orientalist story of discovery and first encounters with strange, native cultures” (1998: 437). Simplistic, teleological narratives are stock-in-trade for IMAX; this is history churned out for the tourist market that expects nothing less than “grand narratives” of conquest and (Euro-)American supremacy.

A Burksian notion of the sublime hangs heavily over *Everest*, defined as “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the idea of pain, and danger,

that is to say, whatever is in any sort of trouble, is conversant with terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke [1792] 1925: 55). The destructive forces of nature, central features of the sublime, provide the *raison d’être* of *Everest*, which has few problems ratcheting up the emotional tempo; after all, IMAX technology has surely met its match in a subject of such epic proportions. And yet, while the sublime qualities of the landscape are certainly evoked by the IMAX camera—the mountain’s mysticism is signified via repeated shots of the moon—the actual summit is something of a cinematic anticlimax, since most of the images are photographic stills rather than IMAX-rendered breathtaking images; as Jerry Adler writing for *Newsweek* points out: “Since the subjects were mostly gasping for breath and barely able to lift their feet, this had the unfortunate effect of rendering the most important scenes as a series of gorgeous, but somewhat torpid tableaux” (1998: 56). The soundtrack and photographic stills have to compensate for the absent motion picture at this moment, a switch in tone that shifts the overall tenor of the film away from the epic (relentlessly signified by the overbearing score) toward the prosaic (the still photographs presented in collage fashion on the screen unfortunately take on the look of skiing-vacation snapshots). The IMAX camera also falls short when it comes to capturing quiet, reflective moments, including the Spanish climber Araceli Segarra’s reaction to the deaths of fellow climbers; using the frame within a frame to signify the look of a digital camera, the scene both evinces and effaces the IMAX gaze, which has to be recontextualized to make for a more intimate video-diary type encounter between climber and audience.

Marking the image as “other” than IMAX reads as a metacomment on IMAX’s inability to capture the intimate, the spontaneous, the small, and the fleeting, or at least a desire on the production team to capitalize on the enormous success of reality TV, which relies on the iconography of video (time-code, viewfinder, shaky camerawork) to shore up the purported realism of this unscripted moment. Shot in the style of home video, the expedition team’s reflections on the climb and tragedy are juxtaposed sharply with the lofty and clichéd prose of Liam Neeson’s narration. Moreover, the monstrous proportions of the human body when blown up by the IMAX camera evoke something of Jonathan Swift’s disgust at the body—the breast in particular—in the Brobdingnag section of *Gulliver’s Travels*, in which Gulliver remarks: “no Object ever disgusted me

so much as the Sight of her monstrous breasts" ([1726] 1994: 82). (One can't help but think of the monstrous size of Michael Jordan's hands in *Michael Jordan to the Max* [2000] or Mick Jagger's lips in *The Rolling Stones at the Max* [1990][Stewart 1993: 58].) The body, in medium or close-up shots at least, assumes gargantuan proportions under the magnifying lens of IMAX, especially 3-D IMAX, which not only increases the size but turns the human frame into a cardboard cutout if not carefully blocked within the *mise-en-scène*. Coupled with the problem of how to represent the human form in medium close-up or close-up for a sustained period is the larger issue of editing in IMAX format; as the IMAX producer Greg MacGillivray explains, "Certain things lend themselves to IMAX over and above other systems. The screen size requires a number of separate eye fixations, so shots need to be longer to allow the audience to take in the entire image. Quick cuts can be too jarring" (Heuring 1990: 42-43). If digital remastering of Hollywood films promises to imbue IMAX's grammar with new agency, the more traditional IMAX film (especially 3-D) will still be crafted with MacGillivray's considerations in mind.

### The Journey's End: Final Thoughts on IMAX

In many ways IMAX has contrived to be—at least in marketing terms—our contemporary version of Homer's *Odyssey*, a form shaped by narratives of mythological import, world narratives if you like, that attempt to make sense of our place in the universe through the IMAXification (if I may coin such a neologism) of natural phenomena and a host of quasi-scientific, human-interest stories (as a tragic mnemonic of similar proportions, the 2003 IMAX release *Ghosts of the Abyss* represents a vertical penetration of space in the opposite direction to *Everest*, a voyage to the wreck of the *Titanic*). Just as the meanings of *Everest* were dramatically shaped by the climbing deaths overshadowing the IMAX ascent and will continue to shift in the wake of ever-increasing demands by climbers to make an attempt on the summit, so too does our heightened state of terrorism alert and global instability in the wake of 9/11 shape the discursive meanings of *Sea of Time*, which becomes something of an ironic and politically charged metacommentary on American identity and urbanism. Despite being Canadian in origin, IMAX is often perceived as a super-sized North American medium churned out by a super-sized culture that thrives on "bigness" and ostentation; Leopold's eagerness to assimilate

and embrace the American dream thus rings a little hollow in the face of America's adventurism overseas and its troubled international reputation. Shots in which the Twin Towers fade from view as one sublime image of the Manhattan skyline dissolves into another imbue the 1996 *Sea of Time* with a pathos and nostalgia that exceeds the moving postcard genre. In addition, the image of two planes on either side of the Twin Towers in the cover art of the video release of *Sea of Time* is an ominous (and ironic) foreshadowing of the destruction of the towers and horrors that beset America on that fateful day in 2001. Moreover, as homeland security is tightened and restrictive immigration policy taints the dream of a better life in the so-called free world, the parable of Leopold Minton may ring true for far fewer immigrants in the years to come.

*Sea of Time* and *Everest* are travelogues that privilege spectacles of grandness and monumentality perfectly befitting a hyperbolic cinematic technology. They are calling-card films for IMAX, two very different cinematic subjects cut from the same ideological cloth. And yet as much as IMAX claims to be the *über* cinematic form, we can't help but wonder how, in an attempt to push the envelope in terms of improving the "IMAX experience" and breaking into the mainstream, IMAX faces challenges that are endemic to its ontological form. If ideas of travel and IMAX are phenomenologically bound—recall that IMAX is itself a tourist destination competing with the very same sites it represents on its screens—whether the journeys IMAX continues to offer viewers will be those they want to take is another matter entirely.

## Notes

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1. The first permanent IMAX projection system was installed at Ontario Place's Cinesphere in Toronto in 1971. IMAX Dome (OMNIMAX) debuted at the Reuben H. Fleet Space Theatre in San Diego in 1973 (Acland 1998: 431).
2. For more on the relationship between IMAX, Gothic cathedrals, and

medieval tapestry, see Griffiths 2003. For a discussion of the connection between IMAX, panoramas, and iPIX (360-degree Internet technology), see Griffiths 2004.

3. Much of the technical information on IMAX is from [www.imax.com](http://www.imax.com) and [www.giantscreenbiz.com](http://www.giantscreenbiz.com). There is also a journal devoted to large-screen film formats, entitled *LF Examiner*.

4. My thanks to Ajay Gehlawat for reminding me of this phrase in Pratt.

5. For a detailed discussion of the *Everest*'s pre-production, see Pfefferman 1995: 37. For more on the challenges of actually shooting on the mountain, see Fairweather 1998: 48–52.