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IMAX TECHNOLOGY AND THE TOURIST GAZE

Abstract

IMAX grew out of the large and multiple screen film experiments produced for Expo '67 in Montréal. Since then, it has become the most successful large format cinema technology. IMAX is a multiple articulation of technological system, corporate entity and cinema practice. This article shows how IMAX is reintroducing a technologically mediated form of 'tourist gaze', as elaborated by John Urry, into the context of the institutions of museums and theme parks. IMAX is seen as a powerful exemplar of the changing role of cinema-going in contemporary post-Fordist culture, revealing new configurations of older cultural forms and practices. In particular, the growth of this brand of commercial cinema runs parallel to a blurring of the realms of social and cultural activity, referred to as a process of 'dedifferentiation'. This article gives special attention to the epistemological dimensions of IMAX's conditions of spectatorship.

Keywords

cinema; epistemology; postmodernism; technology; tourism; spectatorship

Technologies and institutional locations of IMAX

ONE OF THE first things you notice at the start of an IMAX film, after the suspenseful atmosphere created by the muffled acoustics of the theatre, and after you sink into one of the steeply sloped seats and become aware of the immense screen so close to you, is the clarity of the image. As cinema-goers, we are accustomed to celluloid scratches, to dirty or dim projections, and to oddly ubiquitous focus problems. The IMAX image astonishes with its vibrant colours and fine details. Much in the fashion that film realism always dreamed of its

possibilities, it is easy to mistake the IMAX screen for a wonderful, varying window on to real and imagined worlds. *The Living Sea* (Greg MacGillvary, 1994), an IMAX documentary about the majesty and fragility of the world's oceans, is notable less for its eco-friendly message than for the schools of multicoloured fish, edited and composed in constrasting fashion so that their fluid movements are like watching a firework display. Other images compete for the educational theme of *The Living Sea*, especially IMAX's stock point of view travelling camera shots, here used to fly over ocean islands, to swim through underwater seascapes, and to participate in a coastguard practice rescue mission. This is not to suggest that these powerful images are incompatible with Meryl Streep's gentle narration about the interconnectedness of oceanic life; rather, through the size and clarity of the image emerges a kind of postcard environmentalism, in which grand vistas of landscapes and animal life appear to be literally brought before you. As the audience learns about 'the living sea', they also experience the pleasure of spectatorial centrality, finding that the power of the IMAX gaze is a mastery over the film subject.

Paul Virilio (1990) describes IMAX as a form of 'cataract surgery' that essentially grafts its screen upon the eyes of spectators. In his view, IMAX's total encompassing of the field of vision collapses human sight into both filmic and architectural space; the theatre and the images merge with the audience's senses such that the only point of orientation left is that provided by the film. Virilio indicates that this brings IMAX back in time to the origins of motion pictures, back to the fairgrounds of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The stunning films of IMAX and the special viewing situation reignite the early experience of filmic realism – the shock of movement and the sensation of 'being there'. But this return, a full century after the Lumière Brothers and through the hegemony of Hollywood realist conventions, has some striking differences. What does IMAX restructure, and what does it offer as a practised space? What then of its form and economy? This article shows how IMAX is reintroducing a technologically mediated form of tourist gaze into the context of the institutions of museums and theme parks. While focusing upon those two institutions of both public education and touristic activity, IMAX is also a powerful exemplar of the changing role of cinema-going in contemporary post-Fordist culture. In this respect, the case of IMAX reveals new configurations of older cultural forms and practices, and how the conditions of spectatorship are woven into the new arrangement.

IMAX Corporation grew out of the large format and multiple screen films produced for Expo '67 in Montréal. Graeme Ferguson, Robert Kerr and Roman Kroiter, encouraged by the success of their experiments, formed a private corporation to explore the possibilities of large format cinema further. Their strong ties to the National Film Board of Canada meant that there would be a history of appropriating personnel, and with them, thematic and aesthetic concerns; this would be substantial enough for IMAX to be reasonably considered an unofficial

spawn of the NFB. Fuji commissioned the first IMAX film, *Tiger Child* (Donald Brittain, 1970), for its pavilion at Expo '70 in Osaka. The first permanent IMAX theatre, Ontario Place's Cinesphere in Toronto, opened in 1971. Two years later, IMAX opened its first IMAX DOME, or OMNIMAX at the Reuben H. Fleet Space Center in San Diego, with its larger, curved screen and a projector that sits in the middle of the theatre. As of March 1994, there were 121 permanent IMAX theatres in twenty countries, and a backlog of thirty-five new theatres awaiting completion. While remaining based in Toronto, a US investment group, WGIM Acquisition Corporation, purchased IMAX in 1994.

The IMAX experience is an amalgam of a number of cinematic innovations. With the standard IMAX film, the image is eight storeys high and thirty metres wide, making it approximately ten times that of a 35mm film. This is achieved by taking 70mm film stock, turning it on its side, and using fifteen perforations (the sprocket holes on the side of the celluloid) to designate each frame. The physical dimensions of the film necessitated not only the construction of specific cameras and cinemas, but also new ways to project the image. The film itself is so heavy that it could not move smoothly through a projector in a vertical position. Instead, the film lies horizontally, on a flat-bed, with the IMAX patented 'rolling loop' – a wave-like action – moving each frame through the projector. This atypical cinema experience effectively imprints the corporate logo upon every frame; unlike conventional cinema, it is impossible to forget you are watching IMAX technology.

The IMAX experiment is incomplete. It is not a stable set of technological structures in which a form of monumental documentary resides. Instead, IMAX must be seen as a multiple articulation of technological system, corporate entity and cinema practice invested in the notion of expanded cinema, or what Andre Bazin (1967) called the myth of total cinema. Bazin's claim was that an idea about reducing the distinctions between the screen world and the real world fuels film's drive towards realism. Because the ultimate confusion between the mediated and the unmediated is still a long way off, he concluded that the cinema has not yet been invented, but instead is a symptom of that tendency. IMAX, however, takes us another step towards Bazin's objective. Barring the various critiques of Bazin, and of realism as the 'essence' of motion pictures, IMAX is unambiguously a film technology and form designed to create the experience of being there, or getting there, for spectators. Its goal is one of simulation, of hyper-realism, of producing images so real that they offer an illusion of material presence, and of creating the sensation of movement for its spectators. This leads IMAX to continue technological development to improve upon the illusion. The conventions of film realism, cinema vérité and continuity editing are never part of the IMAX promotional material; instead, it refers to the technological innovations in screen size, film stock, film speed, screen curvature, 3-D and architecture. In the end, this becomes its own best argument for investment in its technology; only IMAX film systems can create IMAX film realism.¹

The corporation's revenues come from four main sources: long-term theatre system leasing, maintenance agreements for the systems, film production, and film distribution. Until 1988, most of the IMAX theatre systems were sold, with IMAX owning and operating but a handful. IMAX, however, found selling the systems outright left them with no control over the quality of the theatre environment, which occasionally deteriorated substantially. The possibility of greater revenue through leasing arrangements, coupled with the desire to maintain a particular 'family-oriented' image for the company, led to a shift away from the sale of their systems. Currently, leasing and maintenance agreements are the key source of revenue for IMAX, accounting for over 50 per cent. Put differently, IMAX is largely in the business of leasing its patented technology for film projection. There are over a hundred films in the IMAX film library, though the company has distribution rights to only thirty-nine (in 1994) of them. To date, the most successful film has been *The Dream is Alive* (Graeme Ferguson, 1985), filmed on a space shuttle, which has grossed over \$US 100 million. IMAX also generates revenue from the commissions it receives to produce films, for clients including Lockheed Corporation, the Smithsonian Institute, and the Government of Canada. The rental of IMAX cameras and expertise to other filmmakers is another aspect of their operations.

IMAX's tight vertical intergration means that it is involved in production, or in benefiting from production through equipment rental, receiving commissions to produce films, distributing films, renting and maintaining the theatre systems, and even collecting admissions receipts at the theatres it owns. In this light, the films feed the core of the business, which is leasing and maintaining the technological infrastructure itself. Or, to use the current language of the film business, the software of film feeds the hardware of distribution and technological structures. With this focus upon the technological system (indeed, until 1990, the corporation was called IMAX Systems), it is not surprising to see the IMAX cameras so frequently in the films themselves; technological self-reflexivity relates to the very heart of its business.

In as much as the system's renters represent the principal clients for IMAX, as opposed to IMAX-goers or film financiers, the renters' conceptions of what kinds of films are appropriate play a significant role in IMAX film production. It follows that the location of the theatres, and their association with other investments, activities and practices, is a key determining feature for the films IMAX makes and for the role IMAX plays in contemporary culture. The majority of IMAX theatres are situated at institutional sites; the content of the films reflects this historical relation. In 1994, museum sites accounted for 59 per cent of all IMAX theatres, theme parks accounted for 18 per cent, 3 per cent were zoos and aquaria, and the remaining 20 per cent were commercial sites and 'destination complexes', which refers to high-concept shopping malls. For the theatres scheduled to open over the next two years, the biggest jump is in the final category, which accounts for 29 per cent of the current backlog. Examples of

prominent locations include the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC, the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, the Grand Canyon National Park, four theatres at the Futuroscope complex in Poitiers, France, The Science Museum in Osaka, the Singapore Science Center, the Swedish Museum of Natural History in Stockholm, and the National Museum of Natural Science in Taichung, Taiwan.²

Given IMAX's historical association with museums, it is not surprising to see documentary and educational films predominate the IMAX film library. A deal with Capital Cities/ABC to make education films assures that this direction will continue (Noble, 1994). Recent moves towards fiction film, however, coupled with IMAX's attempts to bring its business closer to Hollywood, has developed a strained relationship with the more traditional institutional locations. Some museums, including the Natural History Museum in New York and the Air and Space Museum in Washington, refused to show the popular IMAX concert film *Rolling Stones: At the Max* (Julian Temple, 1991) because it was seen as inappropriate to the museum's mandate. A more ambitious move into narrative film, and 3-D, is *Wings of Courage* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1995), about Antoine de St Exupery and other pilots in 1930s Argentina, starring Val Kilmer, Tom Hulce and Elizabeth McGovern. Other similar developments include a deal with Sega Enterprises to build two motion simulators, or 'ride-films' (Enchin, 1995c) and with Sony to construct two new IMAX 3-D theatres at Sony's movie theatre entertainment complexes in San Francisco and Berlin (IMAX Corporation, 1995). This follows Sony's success with IMAX 3-D at its Lincoln Square theatre complex in New York. As these corporate arrangements show, the shift from a strictly educational emphasis to a mixed educational and entertainment format occurs not with the production of films alone, but with the construction of new theatres situated in different institutional locations. Consequently, this represents not only a new aesthetic and market concern, but also an articulation with cultural practices other than those of museum-going. In effect, the experience of IMAX is becoming more generalized in the culture, and less associated with education and the museum specifically.

Epistemology of the panoramic view

In his pre-history to the 'society of the spectacle', Jonathan Crary argues that vision becomes a kind of work, subject to a certain discipline, during the onset of modernity (1990: 18). The problem of the observer, a term that connotes 'to comply with' better than the related term 'spectator', 'is the field on which vision in history can be said to materialize, to become itself visible. Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product *and* the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions,

and procedures of subjectification' (Crary, 1990: 5). Anne Friedberg (1993) has commented specifically on motion pictures' association with zones of cultural and commercial practice, linking the visual experience of cinema with that of window shopping. The result, she argues, has been the formation of a 'mobile virtual gaze', where the browsing of shopping and the varying gaze of cinema engender similar social relations. It is suggested by both Crary and Friedberg, among others, that modes of visibility provide a certain access to the world not only through what is seen, but how it is seen in the context of specific technologies and institutions. Technologies of visualization are a structured relation between the human senses and knowledge production, fashioned by and operating within systems of social and institutional relations; they make discursive powers themselves visible, and in this way provide access to historiographic claims about what it meant to look with modern eyes.³

Wolfgang Shivelbusch (1979) describes the reconstruction of city and country space with the introduction of rail travel in the mid-nineteenth century. He argues that rail travel as a new form of mass mobility also presented a panoramic perspective upon the modernizing world. The view from the train was one of both access to changing vistas, and a movement through them, as well as a detached and distant spectatorial relation. The train offers views of 'an evanescent landscape whose rapid motion makes it possible to grasp the whole, to get an *overview*' (Shivelbusch, 1979: 63). Shivelbusch sees the view from the train as a new European perspective that is found in other popular forms. For instance, 'What the opening of major railroads provides in reality – the easy accessibility of distant places – was attempted in illusion, in the decades immediately preceding that opening, by the "panoramic" and "dioramic" shows and gadgets' (1979: 64). Though the relation characterized by Shivelbusch is said to typify the modern, it also seems to capture the conventional postmodern quality of a collapse between actual travel and the illusion. In this way, Baudrillard's (1988) comment that the panoramic experience of highway driving is in fact cinematic is better understood as a continuation of long-standing similar relations between travel and representation.

Drawing upon the particularities of nineteenth-century bourgeois perception, IMAX continues to insist upon spectatorial primacy as a form of knowledge. It is to our age what the Panorama and Diorama were to their time.⁴ The orchestration of the all-engulfing image places viewers in a central location as a source for the unfolding of a known and organized world; the panoramic overview is equally an educational technique to present that vision of the world to an as-yet uninitiated audience or public. The characteristics of this form of bourgeois perception, then, involve the extension and reproduction of that worldview. For this reason, the image of spectatorial centrality is ideologically linked to the reinstatement of certain forms of epistemological power.

Historically, the museum has been one institution built around particular dominant epistemological structures and their arrangement for mass audiences.

As Tony Bennett (1990) has discussed, the core discursive element of the museum has been the democratization of knowledge and a desire to maintain a fix on the forms of knowledge presented. The modern museum matched, and often mismatched, a general Enlightenment principle of human universality with a highly regulated and policed civic space. Codes of public behaviour, including their surveillance and discipline, defined the museum as much as discourses of openness and accessibility. This has frequently taken the form of developing and enforcing a set of practices which guide the encounter between museum visitors and displays, hence between patrons and the museum's tacit classificatory framework. As Bennett (1990: 44–5) puts it,

The purpose, here, is not to know the populace but to allow the people, addressed as subjects of knowledge rather than as objects of administration, to know; not to render the populace visible to power but to render power visible to the people and, at the same time, to represent to them that power as their own.

Museums are very different institutions today, though traces of their earlier nineteenth-century formation are amply evident, and IMAX is consonant with the museum's new relations between entertainment and education. On this shifting stake, Robert Lumley observes that one of the central dilemmas of the modern museum is to determine whether or not 'museums are to have a cultural role as distinct from that of the theme park', and if so, how (1988: 18). The panoramic view of IMAX is part of the new populism of museum sites, in their slide towards the amusement park as a model and in the development of expectations about museum visits. It is part of the museum's shifting stake in the idea of guiding people towards a systematic understanding of the world; it maintains similar forces of subjectification, yet it erodes traditional ideas about education with its powerful brand of sensory pleasure. In other words, IMAX is more than a bit of flashy bait to get people into a dying institution; it promotes a discursive relation, and a specifically technological one, between a public and its education. And the very nature of its panoramic realism, which encourages a collapse of the referent and the reference, reasserts a modern, disciplined, visual relation and code of civic behaviour. To adopt the IMAX gaze is to find oneself firmly interpellated into an epistemological purview that covers both the museum and new entertainment technologies.

IMAX films soar. Especially through the simulation of motion, they encourage a momentary joy in being placed in a space shuttle, on a scuba dive, or on the wing of a fighter jet. For IMAX, 'being there' is most often thought of in terms of a sensation of movement; ironically, it is the induced sensation of travel, rather than arrival at a location, that prompts the claims of hyper-presence. The most conventional ways to construct this relation in IMAX are through point of view camerawork, rapid travelling movements and the use of dizzying heights.

The shots remain steady, for even the slightest tilt or jiggle can be felt in the stomach. Canted camera shots appear only to create the sensation of turning, at which point the audience invariably tilts as well. It is no surprise that flight is a key subject for IMAX; they have explored a remarkable variety of the educational aspects of flight, from its history to the space shuttle and into fiction with *Wings of Courage*. IMAX also habitually presents aerial photography as a way to survey other subjects, especially landscapes. The centrality of flight has been built into one of IMAX's cinemas in Poitiers. The innovation here is that the cinema has a transparent floor through which the audience can look at a second screen below their feet, running in sync with the vertical one in front. They have called this the IMAX MAGIC CARPET.

What happens as the films soar over their subject? Where the thrill(!) of airsickness is an indication of a successful mediation between the viewer and the filmic material, what has IMAX's panoramic overview accomplished? First, it provides a survey, which includes an attempt to visually apprehend the whole world. Benedict Anderson (1991) has remarked upon the relationship between census-taking and the formation of nationhood, where the collection of population data is not just a form of surveillance but also an exercise in asserting the legitimate power to construct images of a citizenry by centralized, and centralizing, institutions. Similarly, IMAX's massive screen and travelling camera construct an idea of totality, leading to the question, 'What more could there be?' This visual and physical exhaustion has correspondences to what Foucault (1970) has pointed out as the modern epistemological project of 'ordering things' through 'les mots et les choses'.

Second, the panoramic survey has the result of arranging and squeezing diverse terrains and distant locations into a central place in the film, in the IMAX theatre. Unlike Shivelbusch's description of rail travel, IMAX offers movement without moving, tourism without travel, and effects a brand of geographical transformation akin to that of map-making. The sequence of images puts forward an argument of geographic centrality to the spectator; the order, and the sensory experience of that order, releases a foundational myth of tourism and museums alike – that of the encounter with distant lives and places, but always through a set of ordering and structuring principles. In the end, IMAX similarly writes a geographical relation in which distance does not matter and in which the organization of sites is always possible in and through its technological system. This geographical transformation through representation is inextricably linked to the museum's collapse into theme park markets and strategies. I suggest, as will be developed in what follows, that the discursive matrix of IMAX represents a new generalizability to the tourist gaze and its associated cultural practices.

IMAX and touristic anticipation

The Grand Canyon Tourist Center boasts an IMAX theatre which presents *Grand Canyon: The Hidden Secrets* (Keith Merrill, 1984) thirteen times a day in the summer, and nine times a day in the winter. The promotional brochure explains that the seventy-foot high screen and the six-track sound allow visitors to 'discover in only 34 minutes a Grand Canyon that would take a lifetime to experience'. The two photographs on the brochure provide an interesting contrast. One is an image of the tourist information centre and its parking lot. The other is a still from the IMAX film, denoted by the sprocket holes added along the top and bottom of the image, with a photograph of rapids literally spilling out of the frame. Nothing designates the location of the tourist centre in the image; it is generic and could be at virtually any tourist attraction. By contrast, the brochure presents the Grand Canyon as it exists on IMAX. The film begins with Anasazi culture, then moves on to conquistador De Cardena's 1540 impressions, and finally to John Wesley Powell's 1869 explorations. This simple narrativization of historical events is familiar to the IMAX screen; beyond the breathtaking images of the natural wonder in the documentary is a colonialist and orientalist story of discovery and first encounters with strange, native cultures. And to round out the introduction to the famous national park, the visitors' centre offers 'native americans in traditional dress on staff' and a Taco Bell restaurant.

IMAX is multiply positioned in discourses of tourism. First, as an unusual cinema experience, it is itself a tourist attraction, one that often requires a certain amount of travel and 'departure' to encounter. For instance, as of March 1994 there was only one IMAX cinema in the UK, one in Indonesia, three in Australia, and none in Canada east of Montréal. Unlike the relative proximity of conventional cinema-going, IMAX remains an extraordinary form associated with a special trip. Second, as noted above, the cinemas are often found at what could be broadly described as tourist sites such as museums and amusement parks. In this respect, IMAX is part of an overall tourist outing, playing a role in the journey as one element in a day's activities, as opposed to the destination *per se*. One does not plan a vacation around the Grand Canyon IMAX; one goes to the Grand Canyon, where the IMAX is one of the many tourist-related experiences available to sample. Third, IMAX typically offers views to other locations and attractions. Its cinema of 'transportation' promises a form of virtual tourism, and invites an understanding of distant locations. For instance, IMAX strategically placed at a tourist attraction might use thematically appropriate films, as is the case with the Grand Canyon IMAX offering year-round screenings of IMAX's *Grand Canyon*. Indeed, as a potential first stop for the visitor, the film presents an ideal encounter with the natural wonder. The swooping cameras, the high perspective surveying the vastness of the canyon, the clear and powerful musical score, create an awe-inspiring sensation that may contribute to and compete with the site itself. Of course, the film's drama of discovery and colonization lives with

the tourist as a way of narrativizing the visit and one's impressions. As John Urry points out, a key aspect of tourism is the construction of anticipation of the experience, and further, 'Photographic images organize our anticipation or day-dreaming about the places we might gaze upon' (1990: 140). Here, IMAX's mode of representation helps form the potential encounter, in effect establishing or priming what Urry calls the systematized and socially constructed gaze of the tourist. In short, IMAX's stake in the tourist gaze is that it constructs a tourist attraction as a view to tourism itself.

Turning to Daniel Boorstein (1964), and even Jean Baudrillard (1983), one would conclude that sites like the Grand Canyon IMAX are typical pseudo-events – or, in this case, what might be called pseudo-visits – which feed a need for safe inauthenticity. In effect, in this view, IMAX helps to insulate tourists from the (un)realities of their world. Instead, I would suggest that IMAX coincides with what Urry (1990) elaborates as the 'post-tourist' who revels in and seeks out the inauthenticity of such pseudo-visits, contrary to what Boorstein characterizes as a retreat. Even more compelling is Dean MacCannell (1976), who emphasizes the touristic occasion as a form of quest for authenticity, in which reified social relations are enacted and reinforced. In this view, the 'real' of IMAX as a tourist site is not the filmic material, not the images of the Grand Canyon, but the rapid tour 'backstage' after the film to see the mechanics of projection and, most impressively, the absence of more than an attendant or two to operate the automated system.

It is my view, however, that the Grand Canyon IMAX is not about the fake or the inauthentic, but that, like the nineteenth-century train, it is one touristic activity that mediates and structures the entire visit. Trips to the Grand Canyon are still made, but they are made with the assistance of other institutions that guide the encounter. For this reason, IMAX is best understood as an example of what Urry (1990) describes as a shift towards post-Fordist forms of tourist practices and economies. This develops in the context of forms of flexible specialization, of international finance, and of new economic relations among national markets. The tourist industry has been democratized in certain ways throughout the twentieth century; its emphasis upon service products, its construction of the 'flight' from the work week and its privileged encounter with otherness, with the exotic, make it a key player in the postindustrial economy. Further, tourism's current tendency to expand into virtually any realm of social life, through an alchemic process by which every place and event has the potential, with the right development, promotion and merchandizing, to be transformed into a cash cow tourist attraction, only heightens its pervasiveness.

The tourist gaze marks an access point to the formation of knowledge about otherness. It 'presupposes a system of social activities and signs which locate the particular tourist practices, not in terms of some intrinsic characteristics, but through the contrasts implied with non-tourist social practices, particularly those based within the home and paid work' (Urry, 1990: 2). Tourism refers to a form

of visitation and encounter with the unfamiliar; it is a departure from the everyday, in terms of both space (physical movement to other locations) and time (designated travel or tourist times like weekends, annual vacations and holidays). The 'tour' suggests a circuit which both guides one away, instructs about the journey, and leads one back.

What then of tourism in the context of changing relations of distance, space and time? What of tourism without travel, as offered by IMAX? In other words, if the very notion of 'departure' no longer refers to the same set of practices and experiences, then we must think about the very concepts of tourism. David Harvey (1990), like other postmodern critics, reminds us that the experience of geography is primarily a form of simulacrum in which the world can figure in its entirety. Potential tourists can anticipate virtually anywhere, which suggests that the postmodern condition is not only one of geographic collapse that provides a sense of proximity to the globe, but that there is a relation of access to it, either through images or actual visitation. While some imply that the distinction between travel and images of travel is being eroded as post-tourism becomes the norm, the existence of each remains, given an unequal distribution of who has the resources to move between the realm of a mediated representational encounter to actual travel, from the pseudo-visit to the visit. Janet Wolff (1985) and Meaghan Morris (1988) have both addressed the especially masculinist access to travel, as well as theory's romantic privileging of nomadic life over domestic space, which once again constructs a crude negatively valued feminine sphere against the 'freedom' of male wanderings. To extend this argument, the power to move throughout the globe, as structured by the materiality of class, race and gender, additionally appears in and is constructed by representational forms. A simple point, perhaps, but one worth emphasizing: while there are material structures guiding touristic practices, those structures are also embroiled in discourses of tourism. One essential element that both virtual and actual touristic forms share is that they are irreducibly lodged in the tourist gaze, one that through its imagined apprehension of the globe pertains to both the construction of anticipation (i.e. knowledge) and availability (i.e. domination).

IMAX echoes other touristic pleasures and representational forms which, broadly defined, could range from roller-coasters to virtual reality. Hence, sightseeing, travel writing (Burke, 1978; Said, 1978) and even localized resorts, such as Blackpool (see Bennett, 1983; Thompson, 1983), are all important precursors to the cultural forms that are currently developing around the mediation of IMAX's travel cinema. In the history of sightseeing, Judith Adler suggests that the conventions of travel writing were part of a project to 'survey all of creation' (1989: 24). IMAX coincides with that articulation of the grand epistemological project of the Enlightenment, and its related colonialist impulse, in the context of collapsing spheres of tourism, museums and theme parks.

Urry concludes that 'contemporary societies are developing less on the basis of surveillance and the normalisation of individuals, and more on the basis of the

democratisation of the tourist gaze and the spectacle-isation of place' (1990: 156). It is difficult to rank the two, and certainly Urry seems to underemphasize the saturation of surveillance in contemporary life. But he is right to remind us that the tourist gaze is no longer a specialized relation; rather, that it is a model for cultural relations for a broad spectrum of social activity. As the industries of the global movement of bodies and images expand, some continue to celebrate a democratization of tourism; I want to emphasize instead a distribution and reinvestment of the forces of orientalism and colonization.

Transnational culture and the destination complex

IMAX is one historical extension of Canadian cinema, bringing together the strong documentary and experimental film traditions, emerging from a mix of public and private cultural funding, and continuing a tradition of national cinema which has its sights set on international markets.⁵ Arguably the most successful Canadian cinema practice, and certainly the most ambitious in its development of specifically designed elements for every stage of production, distribution and exhibition, IMAX also took the next logical step, one that makes it an even better exemplar of the state of national cinemas in the context of international cinema markets: it was bought by a consortium of US investors. What at one time may have been a paradox is no more; today, it is axiomatic that the forces which elevate a culture industry will tend towards its increasing distance from the national domain. Success invariably refers to the dispersal of a corporation into the ether of international finance. In its place are the supposedly obvious proposals of corporate location, as in IMAX's 'Toronto-based' operations. This takes for granted a culture industry logic that the maintenance of local jobs is all that is at stake in questions of national culture. Ultimately, there is no long-term reason for a business to be in any one location, which means that all those forces promoting the international competitiveness of Canadian culture industries may in fact finally succeed in making them so mobile that they depart from the scene altogether. In this context, transnational ownership tries to present itself as a phantom itch – you feel it but it's not really there, supposedly. Few are fooled by this, which is one reason why a city or province's ability to attract international business has become a contemporary political obsession in Canada.

This is not to say that I think IMAX headquarters will leave Toronto at any time in the near future, and in this way sever the last of its historical ties to Canadian cinema practice. However, in a world of the increasing mobility of capital, the very possibility of departure plays to a grander necessity for city, provincial and federal governments to make their home a comfortable one for potentially transient business endeavours. As the many theorists of postindustrial capitalism point out, the relationship between local investment and transnational flow of capital lead to an ever tenuous expectation about the future economic strength

of a region. When this involves a culture industry, the very texture of community life, whether at a city or national level, is worn away, sending ripples of deterioration far beyond those of employees and investors; it sends them on into the heart of civic and intellectual existence.

But even with the ever more abstracted nature of industry, cultural life still touches ground and materializes in particular locations. For IMAX, it is the theatre itself. As a budding transnational cultural player, IMAX is equally an emblem of a certain tendency in US film. In the context of the decreasing irrelevance of domestic box-office receipts as a measure of the success of a Hollywood film, the industry as a whole has been reshaping itself to deal with new forms of distribution and new entertainment tie-ins. Consequently, new cultural practices are developing around motion pictures, particularly through its connections to other activities and sites, thus transforming cinema-going.

In 1994, a US investor group, WGIM Acquisition Corporation, purchased IMAX.⁶ This move also involved a merger with Trumbull Company Incorporated (TCI), founded by Hollywood director and special effects wizard Douglas Trumbull. Already famous for work on films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), he participated in earlier IMAX projects, most significantly *Back to the Future . . . The Ride* in 1990 at Universal Studios, Florida. As a wholly owned subsidiary of IMAX, TCI became IMAX RIDEFILM, with Trumbull remaining as Chair and CEO, as well as occupying a more central position as a Vice-Chair of IMAX.

Some of the salient attributes of IMAX for investors and for corporate strategy include: a backlog of theatres to be built over the next few years (thirty-five in 1995), whose systems leasing is the prime revenue generator; films with a long-term running potential, hence an extremely valuable film library (of which IMAX has distribution rights to about 40 per cent); short films, meaning more shows per day, and therefore a high audience turnover rate; and the uniqueness of the IMAX experience, allowing admission prices to be set above those for traditional cinema (considering the shorter length of the films). According to investors' logic, changes in consumer activity provide contextual details which support IMAX's potential. These include: a stabilization in attendance at traditional cinemas that has coincided with an increase in theme park attendance; the growth of in-home entertainment technologies (VCRs, satellite delivery, cable services, etc.) that have led consumers to look for a variety of out-of-home products that provide a distinct experience; and an overall increase in the amount spent on leisure activities.

The IMAX 'flight' experience, and its merging of both amusement parks and museums, complements rather than competes with in-home entertainment spending. Further, the emphasis upon developing new technological forms (e.g. 3-D) will continue to ensure that IMAX remains in a market with few competitors. This suggests that the overall incentive is to provide short ride-film experiences, which generates revenue (1) by introducing a new audience every ten

minutes or so, (2) by charging a relatively high admission price (say US\$5) for each ride, (3) by being able to offer a longer day (more showings in the morning and through the evening) than traditional theatrical exhibition, and (4) through the longevity of the individual ride-film. On this last point, the Universal Studios' *Back to the Future . . . The Ride* IMAX is already eight years old and shows no sign of slowing down as an audience draw. IMAX has already opened a motion simulator in Lincolnshire, and plans to install others in multiplex cinemas in the US, in addition to its Sega deal (Enchin, 1995a).

Always key to IMAX is the location of the theatre and its integration with other activities and practices, especially tourism and the museum and now, more recently, shopping. The sharp jump in the installation of screens at commercial sites includes a contract to build five theatres with Hammons Entertainment, the biggest single deal in the corporation's history (Enchin, 1995b), and the Sony Theatre in New York, a twelve-screen site with an IMAX 3-D theatre, described as a theatrical exhibition 'theme-plex' (Evans, 1994).

De-differentiation is a convenient term to describe the blurring of realms of social and cultural activity. What may have been more conventionally delimited spaces of public and private life are less identifiable. Urry refers to the post-modern collapse of the high/low culture dichotomy and of spheres of social activity including 'tourism, art, education, photography, television, music, sport, shopping and architecture' (1990: 82). In the present context, the distinctions between the museum and the amusement park, between institutions of public education and public entertainment, between shopping and tourism, and their associated modes of presentation, are increasingly muddled.

The last collapse is evident in the creation and growth of 'destination complexes' which on the surface appear to be upscale, high-concept shopping malls. Even an article on the front page of the *New York Times* announced, 'America's hot tourist spot: the mall outlet' (McDowell, 1996). As sites for public life akin to the marketplace and the town square, these are locations for the exchange of ideas as well as money. Destination complexes have also been involved in attempts to revitalize urban spaces previously devoid of economic activity. A destination complex is where people go to experience something beyond the chores of shopping. It is a shopping theme park; an environment that offers a unique or special shopping experience is offered, and a place that presents an idea of exclusivity to an everyday activity. In this way, destination complexes are the antithesis of warehouse-style shopping, where the attraction is built around an idea of the stripped down functional form of buying as much as possible for as little as possible. And the presence of an IMAX theatre, with its related assemblage of educational, entertainment and touristic discourses, ensures the formation of a mall into a destination complex. Though the tourist gaze is dependent upon its 'departure' from the everyday, de-differentiation, especially at the site of the destination complex, subsumes this gaze into this reconfiguration of 'ordinary' social activity.

These observations matching IMAX's operations with sociocultural trends suggest that IMAX is being seen as one image of future cinema-going; more specifically, the implications point to an agreed-upon notion of 'upscale' cinemas and its relation to special commercial sites. While there are many other interpretations of these shifts, it is important to take seriously what is salient to those in a position to put their assumptions into effect. With an agreed upon future for both cinema and IMAX operating in investment circles, one can reasonably expect it will have direct consequences in corporate decision making, thus affecting the organization of the sites for leisure. And sure enough, the ride-film and the development at commercial sites are becoming a focus for IMAX's place in the changing environment of cinema-going. In short, IMAX is one symptom of a general shift in leisure as well as a more specific reconstitution of the cultural practice of cinema-going.

The conservative horror often expressed about de-differentiation betrays an elitist notion of guarding the best of culture as well as a general disdain for popular pleasure. None the less, it is worth considering what is being lost as well as what is being enabled by the shifts in cultural forms and practices I have identified here. The sliding tourist gaze is one form of popular interpellation, hence of subjectivity, which is becoming increasingly pervasive. By naturalizing coinciding shifts in technological and social relations. IMAX is a complex manifestation of late capitalist forms of perception and knowledge.

Notes

- 1 For additional discussion of IMAX technology and film realism, see Wollen (1993). Belton (1992) offers a broader analysis of the history of projection context.
- 2 With museum sites as the mainstay of IMAX's market, it is worth noting the extent to which these institutional locations are frequently central to their various national contexts, suggesting that there is something about IMAX's mammoth representational form that fits neatly with mandates to promote a centralized national discourse. While it was initially prominent in Canadian technological nationalism, the IMAX system is remarkably mobile and can easily fit with other, or any, national endeavour or location. For example, at Expo '92 in Seville, Spain, IMAX was the centrepiece of the Canadian, Japanese and French pavilions.
- 3 Charney and Schwartz (1995) offer several investigations that expand on the relationship between cinema and modernity.
- 4 For example, the Cyclorama in Ste-Anne-de Beaupré, Québec, established in the late nineteenth century, still offers a circular tour of the Crucifixion of Christ. In its day, it was the largest single canvas painting in the world.
- 5 My articles (Acland, 1995, 1997) elaborate on these observations.

- 6 Two investment analysis reports prepared for the new IMAX Corporation, by Donaldson, Lufkin and Jenrette (1994) and by Goldman Sachs (1994) are the sources for much of the information concerning IMAX's future economic development that follows.

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