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Cinematic New York

From the Hudson River to Niagara Falls, 1896–1920

Phil Solomon's immersive, high-definition installation *American Falls* (2010) transformed the Corcoran Gallery of Art's rotunda in Washington, D. C. from April to July 2010 into a cinema-cum-panorama, where viewers were surrounded by three screens upon which moving images of plunging water alternated with key moments from the nation's past. During my visit I watched it initially in its full 55-minute run, and was struck with the power of the imagery that left me feeling as if I had experienced something that was simultaneously familiar and completely new. Overwhelmed, I left the rotunda and later revisited it several times to review sections of footage, and ponder its meanings. The film opens with shots of Annie Edison Taylor, the first person to survive going over Niagara Falls in a barrel, and proceeds to intersperse footage of historic, political and social events with clips from the history of American cinema¹. The Great Depression, Amelia Earhart's flight, and shots of various presidents are interwoven with Busby Berkeley dance numbers, Harold Lloyd dangling from a clock tower, and Daniel Day-Lewis in *There Will Be Blood* (2007), all set against the relentless falling water². An intricate sound track mixes in parallel fashion popular music, historic addresses, and sound effects from nature. In his moving projection of the march of American history onto the backdrop of its great landscape icon, the artist credits two sources of inspiration: Frederic Edwin Church's large-scale canvas *Niagara* (1857; fig. 1), one of the most popular works in the collection of the Corcoran (which commissioned the work), and the monumental war memorials found outside the gallery's walls on the National Mall. The work belongs to a trans-media dialogue and actively engages with the histories of film and traditional fine art.

American Falls is, more specifically, an elegy both to the medium of film and to the genre of landscape art. Like all elegies, this one emerges at a time when

the old ways are being lost as a new era is dawning. It acknowledges that radical technology has irreversibly altered them both and removed them from the movie theater and the art museum, to inhabit our computers and mobile devices. It is a visual poem expressing a melancholy ode to a world that seems lost to us. The work visually encodes the sense of loss with chemically degraded film and archival footage. But the title of the work, and the single image that binds the whole, is that of a massive cataract that straddles the border between Canada and the United States. On the one hand Solomon takes cues from Church and his teacher Thomas Cole as they straddled the boundaries of history and landscape art. But on the other hand he sat at the feet of the founding figures of film, quotations from whom occur throughout his installation. Considering *American Falls* as a culmination in the filmic depiction of national scenery, this paper employs it as a springboard to traverse backward in time to explore its roots, and thereby investigates the ways landscape functioned in early movies of the silent era (1896–1926).

When movies were 'born', they were a fusion that derived from optics, chemistry, photography, stage, literature, theater, and the visual arts. Extensive study has been devoted to silent cinema's narrative structure, acting styles, auteur system, production and distribution, and even its sounds. But far less attention has been paid to the sites where they were made, and to the sense of place and the added interest it imparted to them. David Wark Griffith — to cite one example — had a good eye for location, and the choices he made about where he shot his film provided depth and subtlety to what would otherwise be rather routine melodramas, as our discussion of his *Way Down East* (below) demonstrates. Like his predecessors, he demonstrated an inclination for sites that had been rendered canonical by more than a century of American visual culture. Of course this

meant that settings like Passaic Falls, Niagara, and the Hudson River offered the dimension of moving and especially falling water to the footage, which in the early days had to be shot with the limitations of a single fixed camera. But as this paper argues, the American landscape tradition more significantly provided the common ground for early filmmakers in much the same way as oft-told story provided the familiar narrative necessary for audiences to follow the action. In the beginning, neither cameramen nor audiences knew how to see cinematically, and as they learned the potential of the new medium they relied on the formats and tropes of the old: landscape painting and its popularization in chromolithographs, calendar art, even china patterns. Surveying three key moments of early cinema demonstrates the evolving dialogue between silent cinema and landscape art. Chronologically examining Thomas Edison, Edwin S. Porter, and D. W. Griffith, I explicate my thesis that a century ago these pioneers necessarily adopted canonical American landscape sites as their points of departure, and viewed them through the paradoxical lens of modern technology and nostalgia³. Since the heart of America's nascent film industry — like its national school of landscape art — was centered on New York, we too focus there.

The invention of moving pictures loosely coincided with the *Columbian Exposition* held in Chicago in 1893, when Frederick Jackson Turner famously declared the frontier closed, and the United States no longer a rural nation but an urban one. Film's advent coincided precisely then with the moment America was becoming modern, and was itself an instrument of modernization⁴. It arrived on the scene as man's relationship to nature was shifting and diverging from one another. Increasingly disconnected from nature in factories or offices, the public found temporary solace in tales of innocent animals and especially faithful dogs. Musing on the enduring popularity of movies featuring the German Shepherd Rin Tin Tin, Susan Orlean explains it this way⁵. She in turn found support in cultural critic John Berger's classic essay entitled "Why Look at Animals?"⁶. The same argument applies to the natural world more broadly, where the insertion of landscape views of open vistas, simple agrarian life, and pristine mountains trigger a similar illusion of

temporary recovery of a vanished world. The more we fashion methods of taming the effects of nature, the more we romanticize those who live in close proximity to it.

From the Paris début of Lumière Brothers' 1895 *Feeding the Baby* (*Le repas de bébé*) — when audiences were as fascinated by the movement of the trees blowing in the wind as they were by the foreground action of a family taking an outdoor meal — nature became a central element of film. When Edison's Vitascope debuted in New York in April 1896, dancing girls filmed in the studio were among the images projected on screen. Once the motion picture camera became minimally mobile (1896 on), filmmakers took to the road. Throughout the silent era films were frequently shot on location rather than on fabricated sets back in the studio. The camera operators worked empirically, and responded to the immediacy of nature. These developments suggest parallels between film and art, between cameramen and landscape painters who worked en plein air. By the time Edison's producer James White and cameraman William Heise visited Haines's Falls to produce *Waterfall in the Catskills* (1897; Edison Manufacturing Company) there was a pictorial tradition already associated with the site, epitomized by Hudson River painter Thomas Cole's *From the Top of Kaaterskill Falls* (1826; Detroit Institute of Arts)⁷. So it was that New Jersey's Passaic Falls, and various other waterfalls in New York's Catskill Mountains all became destinations for early movie production. Travel was at the mainstay of movies from the beginning. In the first ten years of moving pictures, non-fiction films — actualities — were produced in far greater numbers than narrative films. Of the actualities, scenic movies or short travelogues of nature's aspects — both quotidian and grand — account for a large percentage. Such on-site filming posed special challenges, with weather, terrain, and other elements difficult to control, but it provided audiences with at least the illusion of an immediate encounter with nature.

Niagara Falls was the single most famous natural landmark in the Western Hemisphere. No other site was described and sketched more often, and yet it remained unconquerable until Frederic Edwin Church created his large (3 ½x 7 ½ft [106,5 x 229,9 cm])

Niagara, which approached the popular panoramas of the day in scale and in its mode of exposition (fig. 1). The artist transports the viewer to the Canadian side of the Horseshoe Falls, and suspends her/him above the swirling green mass of water. Church's genius lay



Fig. 1: Frederic Edwin Church, *Niagara*, 1857, oil on canvas, 106.5 x 229.9 cm, Washington, D. C., Corcoran Gallery of Art.

in his ability to create a work of art that duplicated the physical and psychological experience of being there⁸. Little wonder then that when it was shown in the Great Picture format of solo exhibitions in 1857, critics exclaimed: "This is Niagara, with the roar left out"⁹. This tradition has been discussed by Iris Cahn as a source of film's landscape repertoire: "By focusing on the glories of nature, the American Great Picture [...] helped to establish an iconography for an early American cinema"¹⁰. Whether the movie men were aware of specific painted precedents is arguably a matter for debate. There is a seventy-year gap in between the two, during which the Hudson River School was eclipsed by European trends like Impressionism, and largely forgotten. Then too photography intervened, and left another yet another body of visual documentation such as Platt Babbitt's remarkable early daguerreotype *Niagara Falls* (circa 1855, fig. 2) and John Soule's stereographs including *Niagara Falls from Point View* (circa 1863–1880) that provided viewers with a three-dimensional perspective. Reckoning the legacy of the Hudson River, we must acknowledge its entry into nineteenth century popular culture through every conceivable mode of delivery, from Currier and Ives prints and calendar art to dinnerware patterns. The imagery of Cole, Church and their brethren, however modified, were ubiquitous and instantaneously recognizable. This is what the early movies trafficked in, as they struggled to educate audiences in how to apprehend and appreciate this startlingly new mode of looking. Edison and his

contemporaries depended on easy to follow story lines — chase scenes, familiar literary plots, and news ripped from the headlines — to organize their initially primitive narrative structures. Landscape sites steeped in tradition established by earlier art assisted audiences in discerning meaning when they recognized it in the new context of movies. Nineteenth century landscape art provided the iconographic foundation, or more literally common ground, that bridged the gap between old and new image delivery systems. Selecting a site from this collective visual database, a movie producer could expect some resonance in the public imagination. This connection was made all the more palpable when early screens were outlined with picture frames.

Niagara became the 'mecca of all early motion picture cameramen' with representatives from Cinématographe Lumière, American Mutoscope & Biograph, the Edison Manufacturing Company, the Eidoloscope Company, and others all vying for optimal vantage points. Existing films and records of lost films document the sheer footage devoted to the subject. At the outset the novelty of motion alone carried the day; early short movies such as *Waterfall*, *Catskills* were shot with a camera fixed on a single spot midway down the falls, with the 'action' being



Fig. 2: Platt Babbitt, *Niagara Falls*, ca. 1855, daguerreotype, 23 x 18 x 2 cm, Washington, D. C., The National Museum of American History.

the continuous fall of water. Soon minimal stories were devised, as in *American Falls from above*, *American Side* (1896; Edison Manufacturing Co.) when a group of tourists file out onto a viewing platform and stand about gesturing and admiring the view¹¹: a motif

that appeared in Church's rendering *Niagara Falls from the American Side* (1867; National Gallery of Scotland)¹². One of the most successful of the early films was *Niagara Falls, Gorge* (1896; Edison Manufacturing Co.) which one reviewer pronounced "a panoramic picture obtained from the rear end of a swiftly moving train on the Niagara Gorge railway, and one that has never been equalled [sic] for completeness of detail and general effects"¹³. The language of commentary reveals aesthetic confusion. In Church's day a feeling of terror in the face of its sublimity was deemed an appropriate response. Now the moving camera — instrument of the modern — was admitting the presence of technology. Other movies were praised for including telegraph poles and fences. Cahn's point that landscape subjects in movies "would be linked to the adventure of the railroad, tourism, and later, to the rugged backdrop of a mythic West" goes to the heart of our argument¹⁴. With the railroads making Niagara more attainable and bridges spanning its once inaccessible breadth, its associations with an untamed wilderness were becoming more difficult to sustain. This was especially true for the employees of Edison, whose experiments in electricity led them to conceive Niagara an inexhaustible source for industrial power. Even as moviemakers traveled to these attractions via railroad, carrying what was at the time state of the art movie cameras, they were not unaware of the alterations their modern age had wrought on these hallowed spaces. As technology harnessed and domesticated the great cataract, it became enshrined in the past, an object of nostalgia. Early movie makers were already recognizing a truth later articulated in John Ford's movie *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962): "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." Movies perpetuated a legendary Niagara, brushed with the tint of nostalgia.

Making *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest* in 1908¹⁵, Edison's cameraman Edwin S. Porter employed the narrative schema he had achieved in his landmark film *Life of an American Fireman* (1902–3; Edison Manufacturing Company), which he himself called "the first story film"¹⁶. Like most claims for primacy, this one must be modified, but it signals us to its remarkable early representational practices. The film

follows the action from the alarm being turned on and the firemen leaping from their beds to the men hitching up the apparatus and leaving the firehouse. It concludes with their arrival at the scene and the actual burning building complete with great smoke and flame effects. Each of the seven scenes had intrinsic merit, but together they added up to the development of a more elaborate and effective story than had hitherto been shown on the movie screen. With the subsequent *Life of an American Policeman* (1905; Edison Manufacturing Company) and the popular sensation *The Great Train Robbery* (1903; Edison Manufacturing Company), Porter had solidified the narrative technique he would employ for the remainder of his career, and put to good use in *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest*¹⁷. It is well known because it featured D. W. Griffith in one of his first film roles, the father who battles an eagle to rescue his abducted child from the bird's nest. But the natural world that provided the film's protagonist remains little examined.

This family drama was based on a famous incident that had been cast in a waxwork in New York's Eden Musee, where it catalogued as follows:

*This artistic group pictures a scene and incident which occurred in the Adirondack Mountains a few years ago. An eagle stole a little child and carried it to its nest high among the crags of the mountains. The father and neighbors pursued and battled with the eagle. After a long fight the eagle was killed and the child rescued. The greatest care has been taken in the coloring of the group, and the light and shadows are so perfect that at first view visitors think that they are in the mountain tops witnessing a real battle*¹⁸.

The film is quintessential Porter, skillfully utilizing temporal overlaps and interweaving painted backdrops with outdoor scenery. But reviewers of the film focused on issues of truth-to-nature and the want of consistency in rendering the mountain scenery, in a manner that echoes the criticism of Hudson River paintings a half century before. What interests me here is precisely that constructed quality to which contemporary audiences objected, and which Porter and his new, talented scenic artist Richard Murphy rather inventively orchestrated from the history of art.

First, they moved the location from the actual scene of the event in the Adirondacks to the Hudson Valley. This mutability of place, the deliberate move from the actual to the fictive, is a commonplace of film throughout its history and speaks to the need to transcend the specifics of a written account (whether based on a news event, novel, or play) and reposition the action within the most visually optimal locale. The most famous instance of this occurs in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), which opens with "Texas" emblazoned across the screen while the camera pans across the signature rock formations of Monument Valley, a far cry from the plains where the original story took place but more compelling visually and metaphorically. In *Rescue Porter* (with Murphy, although sadly we do not know the details of that collaboration) creates a dramatic scene where the eagle flies high above the river panorama with the baby suspended from its talons. Comparisons between moving and still images of the riverscape immediately spring to mind from prints by William Bartlett to paintings by John Frederick Kensett depicting that strategic site of West Point Academy, where the Hudson River bends and flows through the mountain highlands. Then too there is the image of the eagle and baby in flight, which recast the famous images of *The Rape of Ganymede* from ancient mythology into American folklore. Watching the film, one fine art image after another comes to mind that parallels or intersects those on the screen, but here I will restrict myself to one further example: a classic nineteenth century genre painting by George Caleb Bingham, *The Squatters* (1850; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; fig. 3) which echoes the film's opening shot of the exterior of the family's rustic cabin, complete with campfire and earthenware jugs, before which the mother placed the baby in her cradle while she works. Circulated via prints, Bingham's composition popularized the landscape composition that encodes new settlement: the homestead is perched on the edge of a plateau, beyond which stretches the expansive valley. Working with conventional visual cues, painter and movie man convey the great challenges this family overcame to arrive at this place, where the promise of America's Manifest Destiny is fulfilled.



Fig. 3: George Caleb Bingham, *The Squatters*, 1850, oil on canvas, 59.37 x 71.75 cm, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

The birth and rapid expansion of nickelodeon exhibitions catalyzed a crisis in cinema just at this very moment in 1907 when Porter was about to release *Rescue from an Eagle's Nest*. At issue was not only how to represent a story cinematically but also what to represent. The public was demanding increasing sensationalism while censors advocated good, wholesome entertainment. A new age was dawning, and Porter — who had been in on the ground floor of the medium and advanced the telling of film narratives for the past ten years — had reached a plateau. Because Porter seemed to be resisting the relentless march of progress, Edison fired him. But Noël Burch's description of him as a Janus figure looking simultaneously to the past and to the future is more useful in understanding Porter's participation in the art-film dialogue than is Edison's dismissal. Born in 1870, he spent the first twenty-three years of his life in Connellsville, Pennsylvania, which was a small industrial center with ties to coal and the railroad. It is not surprising then when he arrived in New York and began working with Edison that his moving pictures romanticized family life and exhibited nostalgia for a lost America¹⁹. It would fall to Porter's actor Griffith to take these matters to the next level.

Now we fast-forward to 1920, to D. W. Griffith, and his thirteen-reel *Way Down East* (United Artists) his most expensive film to date²⁰. The escalated costs were due neither to the purported cast of thousands he had hired for *The Birth of a Nation* (1915; Epoch Producing Corp.) nor to set construction such as the

architectural fantasy for *Intolerance* (1916; Wark Producing Co.) but rather to the very subject of our inquiry: its actual landscape setting. “There are few movies that allow you to feel the weather and the changing of the seasons in a landscape as tangibly as Griffith does in this masterpiece,” as one critic rightly insists²¹. He made it at a critical juncture in his career: in 1919 when he returned to the East Coast after an interlude in Los Angeles and built an expensive new studio complex in Mamaroneck, Long Island. But much of *Way Down East* was not shot in the studio but rather on location in Florida and especially in New England — along the Connecticut River and in Vermont — the stomping grounds of Cole and his followers. The effects he achieved were well worth the investment, for *Way Down East* was his biggest critical and box office success to date. As he explained in the publicity-oriented *Letter to the People, Whose Servant I Am*, it had more to do with ‘atmosphere’, with simply waiting for the seasons, and with the elemental, restless forces of nature²². He was referring especially to the blizzard and ice floe in the film’s oft-quoted scene where unwed mother Anna Moore (played by Lillian Gish) is rescued by David Bartlett (Richard Barthelmess) in its dramatic and visually stunning finale. But there were many other significant natural elements. It is important then to analyze the ‘atmosphere’ created in the film, and its relation to the history of American visual culture. While Griffith’s deliberate referencing of nineteenth century European art has been documented — as in his quote of Jean-François Millet’s *Angelus* (1859; Musée d’Orsay) — less studied is his knowledge of nineteenth century American art. What follows then is a speculative discussion of Griffith’s intersection with his predecessors in American painting, and the uses to which he put landscape in his practice.

Cinematically stunning, *Way Down East* is one of several films of 1919 and 1920 that revisit themes first explored in the Biograph years 1908 to 1913. Both featured rural-life and set up a conflict between honest country values and the superficial attitudes associated with the city. Like *A Romance of Happy Valley* (1919; D. W. Griffith Production) and *True Heart Susie* (1919; D. W. Griffith Production) *Way Down East* represents a refinement of that duality. Once the

countryside is established as superior, *Way Down East* then nuances the perception of rural nature to embrace both the sublime and picturesque. The ice-floe climax is justly famous for its stomach-wrenching, rapidly-edited montage depicting unconscious Anna lying helpless on a sheet of broken ice as it heads towards a waterfall, only rescued in the nick of time by David Bartlett²³. This is nature at its most sublime: invoking fear and terror in the eye of the beholder. Yet the scene derives its power in part from contrast with other moments in the film when nature was characterized at its most benign and pastoral. Anna’s arrival at the Bartlett farm is just such a scene. It is spring, as we know from the blooming flowers and leafy boughs of the old tree, and the camera takes a slow, extended shot of the front yard complete with chickens. The weathered look of the farmhouse and its comfortable situation within its surrounding terrain evoke a pastoral scene. Landscape in *Way Down East* is both nurturing and threatening, a dichotomy the director ‘conveys’ by switching aesthetic modes from the picturesque to the sublime.

This was precisely the strategy employed in several of the iconic Hudson River School images including



Fig. 4: Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm - (The Oxbow)*, 1836, oil on canvas, 130.8 x 193 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Asher Brown Durand’s *Progress* (1853; Private Collection, New York) or Cole’s *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm* (known as *The Oxbow*, 1836; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, fig. 4) which represents a scene on the same Connecticut River that served Griffith so well. Cole’s bisected composition contrasts wild nature on the left — character-

ized by tangled branches, blasted trees and threatening storm — with the clear skies and cultivated fields at the right. Sometimes called pre-cinematic or at least proto-cinematic, Cole's work takes the viewer on a journey through the fictive space that he recreated from sketches he made on the spot, as emphasized via the figure of the artist at his easel tucked in among the foliage in the middle distance of *The Oxbow*²⁴. Griffith too was photographed working along the river at the height of winter, his great coat flapping the wind as he braved the elements to direct his cameraman Billy Bitzer to get just the right shot. Both portrayals are rooted in the tradition of painting on the spot — en plein air — that emphasized the artist not only as witness to the scene, but also as braving challenges of terrain and climate to attain the perfect shot.

Such depictions are of course fictions, for neither Cole nor Griffith were interested in creating an entirely realistic scene. Rather they captured elements of the physical environment on-site and re-combined them back in the studio. By his own admission Cole's creative process involved working on the spot and then allowing time to pass, and a veil of memory to fall over the unessential details of the scene, before he painted the finished picture²⁵. His canvases represent a synthesis of the real and the ideal. Similarly, Griffith had to travel to sites as diverse as New York, Connecticut, Vermont, and Florida to forge a single coherent cinematic space that would stand for his unidentified New England town. *Way Down East's* subtitle — *A simple story of plain people* — says it all. Griffith aimed to make an epic that conveyed an image of a vanished, unspoiled, and pastoral America. Everything from the slightly defensive inter-titles to the gently ironic performances, however, signals us to the fact that the world depicted on the screen has already slipped away from us²⁶. And in fact, even in the 1830s when Cole worked in the Connecticut Valley, it was already showing signs of cultivation and tourism²⁷. Both landscapes are born of nostalgia. Working in 1920, almost a century after Thomas Cole had arrived in New York and founded the Hudson River School, Griffith gravitated toward the same sites, operated with an inherited mindset, and employed some of the same strategies of landscape art

as his predecessor. By this point, however, Griffith had so mastered his craft that he could simultaneously draw from the past and look to its future. *Way Down East* is therefore best understood as a pictorial hybrid. Just as it thematically merged Victorian melodrama with modern critique of social mores and the double standard to which women were subject, so visually it combines nineteenth century artistic tropes with an early twentieth century vision of landscape. Thus the movie contains references to the maple sugaring that recalls Eastman Johnson's canvases of 1861–65, including *Sugaring Off* (Huntington Library, San Marino, CA) and *Making Maple Sugar* (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT). This is then contrasted with passages of the frozen river in close up with rapid editing, from the deep, dark blackness of the river to the flashes of white, fragile fragments of ice. And in this footage he anticipates modernist extraction from nature, as in the work of the Stieglitz Circle. Griffith could move beyond the old landscape conventions and venture into new territory precisely because he had fulfilled his self-proclaimed aim that he wanted to make audiences see cinematically. In that sense, Phil Solomon and his *American Falls* can be seen as the latest contributor to the art-film dialogue that had begun with Edison, Porter, and Griffith. The power of his work and that of his predecessors drew upon an ever-expanding visual database whose foundations were located in the American landscape tradition.

Notes

1. See *American Falls – Opening Section*, 2010, Phil Solomon, 5', <https://vimeo.com/69816031>, 16 March 2015.
2. See *American Falls – Great Depression to Dust Bowl to Amelia*, 2010, Phil Solomon, 5', <https://vimeo.com/69814460>, 16 March 2015.
3. For a complementary look at contemporary film and video in relation to place see Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine. A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place*, Berkeley (Cal.)/Los Angeles 2001.
4. See Mary Lea Bandy, *The American Place. Landscape in the Early Western*, in: *MoMA*, 3, 1, 2000, pp. 6-9.
5. See Susan Orlean, *Rin Tin Tin. The Life & the Legend*, New York 2011.
6. John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?*, in: John Berger, *About Looking*, New York 1980 [1977], pp. 3-28.
7. See *Waterfall in the Catskills*, 1897, 1', <http://www.loc.gov/item/00694329/>, 16 March 2015.
8. See Katherine E. Manthorne, *Experiencing Nature in Early Film: Dialogues with Church's Niagara and Homer's Seascapes*, in: *Moving Pictures. American Art and Early Film, 1880–1910*, ed. by Nancy Mowll Mathews, New York et al. 2005, pp. 55-60.
9. *Our Private Correspondence*, in: *The Home Journal*, May 5, 1857, p. 2.
10. Iris Cahn, *The Changing Landscape of Modernity: Early Film and America's Great Picture Tradition*, in: *Wide Angle*, 18, 3, 1996, pp. 85-100, p. 90.
11. See *American Falls from above, American Side*, 1896, 1', <http://www.loc.gov/item/00694144/>, 16 March 2015.
12. Many of these short movies (many under a minute) are available in the Library of Congress, Paper Print Film Division; see <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/edhtml/edmvhm.html>, 1 January 2015.
13. *Boston Herald*, June 23, 1896, p. 9.
14. Cahn 1996, *The Changing Landscape of Modernity*, p. 90.
15. See *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest*, 1908, Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley, 7', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ghxyw4zAEAk>, 16 March 2015.
16. Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon. Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company*, Berkeley (Cal.) 1991, p. 212.
17. See Musser 1991, *Before the Nickelodeon*, pp. 212-234.
18. Musser 1991, *Before the Nickelodeon*, pp. 410-411; p. 411.
19. Musser 1991, *Before the Nickelodeon*, p. 226. Burch cited *ibid*.
20. Cf. Scott Simmon, *The Films of D. W. Griffith*, Cambridge 1993, p. 13. Discusses the costs of the film.
21. Michael Glover Smith, *D. W. in HD*, on: <http://whitecitycinema.com/tag/way-down-east>, 5 September 2012.
22. Simmon 1993, *The Films of D. W. Griffith*, p. 13. The letter was published in numerous newspapers.
23. See *Way Down East*, 1920, David Wark Griffith, 145', https://en.wiki2.org/wiki/File%3AWay_Down_East_%28film,_1920%29.webm, 16 March 2015 – the final sequence begins around 2:10:00.
24. MacDonald 2001, *The Garden in the Machine*, pp. 10-13.
25. Rev. Louis L. Noble, *The Course of Empire, Voyage of Life and Other Pictures of Thomas Cole*, New York 1853, p. 248.
26. See Simmon 1993, *The Films of D. W. Griffith*, pp. 13, 20, 25.
27. MacDonald 2001, *The Garden in the Machine*, p. 11.

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- Fig. 1: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Frederic_Edwin_Church_-_Niagara_Falls_-_WGA04867.jpg, 16 March 2015.
- Fig. 2: <http://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?responseType=location&id=NMAH-2001-14092>, 16 March 2015.
- Fig. 3: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Caleb_Bingham_-_The_Squatters.jpg, 16 March 2015.
- Fig. 4: <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/10497>, 16 March 2015.

Films

- American Falls from above, American Side*, 1896 (note 11): <http://www.loc.gov/item/00694144/>, 16 March 2015.
- American Falls – Great Depression to Dust Bowl to Amelia*, 2010, Phil Solomon (note 2): <https://vimeo.com/69814460>, 16 March 2015.
- American Falls – Opening Section*, 2010, Phil Solomon (note 1): <https://vimeo.com/69816031>, 16 March 2015.
- Rescued from an Eagle's Nest*, 1908, Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley (note 15): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ghxyw4zAEAk>, 16 March 2015.
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- Way Down East*, 1920, David Wark Griffith (note 23): https://en.wiki2.org/wiki/File%3AWay_Down_East_%28film,_1920%29.webm, 16 March 2015.

Abstract

Phil Solomon's immersive, high-definition installation *American Falls* (2010) transformed the Corcoran Gallery of Art's rotunda in Washington, D. C. from April to July 2010 into a cinema-cum-panorama, where viewers were surrounded by three screens upon which moving images of plunging water alternated with key moments from the nation's past. Considering *American Falls* as a culmination in the filmic depiction of national scenery, this paper employs it as a springboard to traverse backward in time to explore its roots, and thereby investigates the ways landscape functioned in early movies of the silent era (1896–1926). I argue that nineteenth century American landscape art provided the common ground for early filmmakers in much the same way as an oft-told story provided the familiar narrative necessary for audiences to follow silent movie action. In the beginning, neither cameramen nor audiences knew how to see cinematically, and as they learned the potential of the new medium they relied on the formats and tropes of the old: landscape painting and its popularization in chromolithographs, calendar art, even china patterns. Surveying three key moments of early cinema demonstrates the evolving dialogue between silent cinema and landscape art. Chronologically examining Thomas Edison, Edwin S. Porter, and D. W. Griffith, I explicate my thesis that a century ago these pioneers necessarily adopted canonical American landscape sites as their points of departure, and viewed them through the paradoxical lens of modern technology and nostalgia. Since the heart of America's nascent film industry — like its Hudson River School — was centered on New York, we too focus there.

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Title

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