
Introduction

But there do come certain moments in the history of a community when people can look around and say, “Well, here we are. What’s next?” We have arrived at such a pause for clarification and decision in Vermont. Our providential wilderness cannot be taken for granted today. Because for a century we stood outside America’s economic mainstream, our region’s nonhuman community enjoyed a rare opportunity to recover. But in this new era of telecommunications, when business is no longer so closely tied to major manufacturing centers, there will be no more security for beautiful backwaters. Unless we find the will to protect the North Mountains of our state— as terrain in which selective logging, human recreation, and wildlife can coexist— we could lose within just a few seasons the balance that has grown up here.

JOHN ELDER, *READING THE MOUNTAINS OF HOME*

The Garden in the Machine is the result of two explorations, one more obviously professional, the other more obviously personal; or to be more precise, the eleven essays that follow are the product of a decade-long intersection of these two explorations. Since the late 1970s, nearly all of my scholarly and critical energies, and a substantial portion of my pedagogical energy, have been devoted to what is variously termed “avant-garde film,” “independent film,” “experimental film” (in recent years, I have included “video art” as well): that immense world of alternative media that has developed generally outside the commercial histories of the movies and television and remains outside the awareness of both the mass audience and most teachers, critics, and scholars of media, the humanities, and cultural studies. I have found the many and varied achievements of this alternative media history endlessly stimulating and rewarding—and, in pedagogical contexts, remarkably invigorating. Indeed, one of contemporary academe’s most stunning paradoxes is that, in an era when “media literacy” is so crucial and alternatives to conventional consumer culture so necessary, this unparalleled pedagogical resource is generally ignored.

The second exploration began as a personal response to my local circumstances, although in recent years it has become more fully a part of my serious research. Early in my forties, during the conventional midlife crisis, I came to realize not only that I had spent fifteen years in central New York—twelve more than I had expected or planned—but that I was likely to spend many more years here. Central New York was becoming “my place,” seemingly without my conscious participation. I decided, of course, to “make the best of it” and did so by finding my way into the Adirondacks and Catskills, and into the

cultural history of the region. The more I learned about upstate New York, the more interested I became not only in this place but in places in general, in all their specificity and interconnectedness. Inevitably, given my professional commitments, my developing interest in history and geography came to include—came to focus on—the history and geography of the *depiction* of place, in literature, painting (see fig. 1), and photography and especially in film and video.

Because many of the most inventive, evocative, and stimulating—even the most beautiful—twentieth-century depictions of place, particularly American place, are found in alternative films and videos and because nearly all these works remain unknown to most of those likely to find them interesting and useful, a book on some of the more remarkable and the issues they raise seemed called for. Further, because many of these works pose challenges to viewers, especially viewers coming upon them for the first time with expecta-



Figure 1. Frederic Edwin Church's *Sunset* (1856), oil on canvas, 24" × 36", one of the gems of the Proctor Collection at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Museum of Art, Utica, New York.

tions developed by commercial media, some detailed contextualization and in-depth analysis seemed essential.

This book was written during a moment when the idea of interdisciplinary study has been increasingly exciting to a good many academics. My hope is that *The Garden in the Machine* will work across traditional academic boundaries: in other words, it should serve not only the field of film studies, but those many other sectors of academe involved with the idea and the depiction of place. Specifically, I have contextualized my discussions of particular films and videos in ways that, if I have chosen well, should demonstrate their relevance for American studies, for art history, and for environmental studies, most obviously—and with luck for other disciplines as well.

The order of the eleven essays, in addition to reflecting the progress of my thinking about the films and videos I discuss, has a certain rough trajectory. The first three chapters use developments in the visual arts during the nineteenth century, and earlier, as a context for films that engage the idea of original American nature and its depiction as wilderness or as pastoral. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the exploration of the American West, in early and contemporary times. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 explore the development of the modern city and the city film, and ways of responding culturally and cinematically to the stresses of urban experience. Chapters 9 and 10 focus on critiques of romantic ideas about country and city. *The Garden in the Machine* concludes with a discussion of films that offer some sense of recovery from the lost innocence explored in “Expulsion from the Garden” (chap. 9) and “Satan’s National Park” (chap. 10). I could not resist arranging the chapters “topographically”: chapter 6, “The City as Motion Picture,” focuses on urban spaces and is surrounded by chapters that focus on rural spaces or intersections of the rural and the urban.

The prose style of *The Garden in the Machine* is meant to be as accessible to students and general readers as to scholars and faculty, and to recognize several crucial practical realities, the most obvious of which is that most readers will be unfamiliar with most of the films and videos I discuss. This means that a certain amount of description of the works—both their physical nature (how they look and sound, their timing) and the viewing experience they create—is inevitable, although I have attempted to hold such description to a minimum and, where possible, to enhance the reader’s sense of these works with visual

imagery. The introductory mission of the book precludes anything like a thorough review of the critical histories of the films and videos I discuss—although, of course, I provide access to relevant sources for those in film studies and those in other fields interested in a more complex understanding of the critical history of these works. A detailed list of sources for the films and videos discussed is also included.

It will be obvious to my colleagues in film studies that my survey is anything but exhaustive. Certainly, I am aware of a good many films and videos that might have been included in my discussions; and no doubt, there are many relevant works I am not yet acquainted with. I have attempted to discuss a sufficient number of works to demonstrate the accomplishment and potential of the larger field my selections represent. If I have been successful, others will be drawn toward a more thorough exploration.

The obvious American bias of my discussions is certainly not meant to denigrate the accomplishments of those working in other areas of the world who have explored issues of place. For example, over the past generation a considerable body of film and video about landscape and cityscape has been produced in the United Kingdom. Clearly, Chris Welsby's films could sustain a lengthy discussion; and he is one of many. And Canadian filmmakers and videomakers have frequently explored issues I discuss. Michael Snow (*La région centrale* [1971], *Seated Figures* [1989]) and Joyce Wieland (*La raison avant la passion* [1969]) are particularly noteworthy instances.

Some readers may feel that my decision to focus on only a few American commercial films and even fewer documentaries is unfortunate. Why give several pages to *Twister* (1969) and only cursory mention to John Ford? Indeed, where is the whole history of the Western? Why not discuss Terence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) and *Days of Heaven* (1978)? What about all the documentary filmmakers who have represented American landscape and cityscape: Robert Flaherty, Willard Van Dyke, Pare Lorentz, Frederick Wiseman, Errol Morris, Sarah Elder/Leonard Kamenring . . . ? And those familiar with the history of video will wonder how I could include Ellen Spiro and George Kuchar but not Bill Viola and Mary Lucier. I can only hope that the discussions I *have* included in *The Garden in the Machine* are useful enough to justify the many obvious limits of my survey. That there *are* so many limits, of course, is inspiration for further explorations.

One thing, however, is already certain: whatever the extent or limitations in my coverage of independent cinema, my enterprise is constricted in another, far graver sense. Despite their remarkable visual and conceptual accomplishments and their virtually incomparable pedagogical value, the majority of the films explored in *The Garden in the Machine* (all those other than the commercial features and the documentaries) are instances of an endangered cinematic species. Because these films have been so consistently underutilized, their economic viability is seriously in jeopardy. When film rentals are not adequate, new 16mm prints cannot be struck, and the remaining prints suffer more and more damage. To cite one example of the extent of this problem: as this is written, so far as I know, only one good print of Larry Gottheim's *Horizons* (1973), the focus of chapter 2, remains available, and that print is showing signs of wear.

A related problem involves the increasing reliance of so many academic institutions on video and other new technologies and the atrophy of first-rate 16mm screening conditions. The overwhelming majority of the films I discuss were made in 16mm for exhibition in a public space where good 16mm projection is possible. Not only are these films generally unavailable in any format other than 16mm, but even if there were money for transfer from 16mm to video, laser disk, or DVD, so much of their visual subtlety might be lost that the transfer would be pointless (and, in any case, each new format seems to have a shorter life span than the one it replaces). Of course, the lure of the new technologies for academics is that once a new system is in place, the cost of buying or renting videos (or laser disks . . .) of films is far less than the cost of renting 16mm prints. The corollary is that those films available only in 16mm tend to be forgotten. The irony is that there is no necessity in this increasingly pervasive pattern. My experience as a teacher at a variety of academic institutions tells me that the resources for renting 16mm prints are nearly always available; I believe any dedicated teacher can raise the necessary rental money. And so long as prints are regularly rented, new prints can be struck, and the 16mm experience of the films can continue.

A central mission of *The Garden in the Machine* is to draw increased attention to that larger body of 16mm film represented by the films I discuss. If those academic disciplines that can profit from this body of work, and those creative exhibitors with the capability of presenting 16mm film effectively, can

recognize that a major resource is currently being ignored—wasted—this remarkable cultural accomplishment may continue to invigorate lovers of the moving image for generations to come. If I can play a small role in this process, I will feel well rewarded.

In researching and writing *The Garden in the Machine*, I have had the assistance of a good many people.

Most obviously, the artists whose work is the subject of these essays have been entirely responsive to and supportive of my efforts, making their films and videos, their personal archives, and their time and energy available to me. I have also had consistent support from distributors of avant-garde film and video: most consistently, Canyon Cinema in San Francisco (Dominic Angerame and David Sherman assisted me at every turn) and the Filmmakers' Cooperative in New York (M. M. Serra was consistently patient and generous with me); but also Video Data Bank in Chicago (who shared its collection of George Kuchar tapes with me) and Women Make Movies (thanks to Debbie Zimmerman). Archivists at several major film archives made work available to me and assisted with illustrations: thanks especially to Robert Haller at Anthology Film Archives, to Rosemary C. Hanes at the Library of Congress, to Charles Silver at the Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center and Terry Geesken at the Film Stills Archive, and to Kathy Geritz and Steve Seid at the Pacific Film Archive.

I also had the good fortune to be able to attend two National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institutes for College and University Faculty, both of them designed and hosted by H. Daniel Peck at Vassar College. The first, "Hudson River Valley Images and Texts: Constructing a National Culture in Nineteenth-Century America," was held during June–July 1993, while I was in the beginning stages of the project—it could not have come at a better time for me. This institute was a group process, and I am indebted to all those who contributed to the experience, though I was assisted in quite specific ways by Dan Peck, Charles Colbert, Wayne C. Franklin, Patrick McGreevy, Angela Miller, Bruce Richardson, and Don Scheese. The second institute, "The Environmental Imagination: Issues and Problems in American Nature Writing," came midway in my writing and helped energize me to complete *The Garden in the Machine*. This institute too was a group process (my thanks to all who

participated), but I owe a particular debt, again, to Dan Peck and Wayne Franklin and to Ralph Black, Lawrence Buell, Douglas Burton-Christie, Karen Cole, Janice Simon, H. Lewis Ulman, Monica Weis, and Ning Yu.

During August 1996 I attended the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, “Landscapes and Place,” curated by Ruth Bradley, Kathy High, and Loretta Todd, and found it a valuable experience. Ruth Bradley, who has edited *Wide Angle* in recent years, also contributed to this project by providing me with the opportunity to edit “Movies Before Cinema,” two special issues of *Wide Angle* (vol. 18, nos. 2, 3) devoted to forms of motion picture that predate the invention of cinema. I am grateful for her patience and support.

Several colleagues—Patricia R. O’Neill (at Hamilton College), Paul D. Schweizer (at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, New York), P. Adams Sitney (at Princeton University), and Patricia R. Zimmermann (at Ithaca College)—generously took time to provide valuable suggestions for revision. And other colleagues—Steve Anker (at the San Francisco Cinematheque), Mary Lea Bandy (at the Museum of Modern Art), Cindy Booth and Michael Schuyler (librarians at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute), Frank Bergmann (at Utica College), Ed Dimendberg (at the University of Michigan), R. Bruce Jenkins (now at the Harvard Film Archive), Ann Martin (editor, *Film Quarterly*), Angela Miller (at Washington University, St. Louis), Marie Nesthus (at the Donnell Public Library in New York), Barbara Ras (at the University of Georgia Press), and Scott Slovic (editor, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*)—as well as a number of my students at Utica College and Hamilton College (especially Joe Cintron, Ben Couch, Kyle Harris, Christian Tico, and Carl Wohnsen) and my neighbor, Terry Grimmer Krumbach, provided crucial forms of intellectual, moral, and practical support. My typist, Carol Fobes, worked tirelessly on revision after revision of chapter after chapter and never lost patience with me.

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Earlier versions of several chapters, or portions of chapters, have been published previously, and these publications are listed on the copyright page. I am grateful for permission to reprint these essays.