

Research Article



Iridescent Vacationism: Chromophilia in the Xerox Century

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What's the best way to be somewhere you're not from? How should you visit? And how should you leave? Should you *go* on vacation? Or *take* a vacation? The following considers new methods of experiencing unfamiliar places and spaces, particularly focusing on urban experiences. The suggestion within is that the embarrassing and exploitative practice known as tourism may be supplanted by an iridescent vacationism. Key to this recalibration are sensory oscillations—seeing rather than looking, listening rather than hearing, feeling rather than touching. Vacationism seeks to “cultivate a habit of listening and observing, rather than merely hearing and seeing” (O’Grady 1980). Vacations are not geographic or temporal but sensational.

Dangerously adjacent to the act of *being somewhere you're not from*, are exploitative injustices like colonialism, voyeurism, or gentrification. For much of the past few centuries, going to novel places has been a privilege afforded only to upper class Euro-Westerners. Tourism, at worst, is an ecocidal form of luxury colonialism. An environmentally and economically neutral future may be one without tourism. Figuring out a way to benignly or beneficially engage with foreign places is crucial for building a more just and equitable globe. The vacationism elaborated here is perhaps closer to impressionism or expressionism than tourism. While not an artistic movement, vacationism does suggest new methods for expressing the world, specifically through a reconsideration of the role of color in urban spatiality.

This essay considers how people visit cities. According to statistics collected by credit card companies, New York welcomes 13.6 million onlookers per year—more than its full-time population. But what are these ~26 million eyes looking at? Are they really here? While surely these bodies are occupying the same space as the city’s residents, are they occupying the same place? “Place incarnates the experience and aspirations of a people...it is...a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning” (Tuan 1979, 387).

As such, New York, or Paris, or Tokyo cannot be visited, they are *invisible*. The retinal gulf between image and aperture is unbridgeable. Such cities are buried underneath the optical accretion of a Xerox century. The geophysical New York on display for tourists is a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy (...) of a photograph that no longer remotely represents the place signified in the image or the imagination. “[U]rban space is produced as a facsimile of itself as developers respond to the fiscal demands of tourism and commerce rather than the needs of its inhabitants” (Shaw 2018, 444). This article wonders if there are better ways of *seeing* new cities and seeing cities anew.

Tour de France

The TV host Rick Steves has spent the past two decades encouraging and inspiring U.S.-Americans to travel to Europe. His chipper attitude has made trips to Europe much more appealing to middle-class, middle-aged Midwesterners. It might be tempting to mock his nerdiness, but his joyful enthusiasm makes him immune to the lashes of jaded cynics. While his sincerity is admirable, is his approach to visiting foreign cities healthy? Or does it reinforce some regrettable qualities of normalized colonial voyeurism? Is he

programming what and how visitors see? Can tourism be deprogrammed?

Steves does much to promote local tourism industries, advocating the noble craft of tour guide. While the expertise and labor of guides should not be diminished, guided tours through new cityscapes are often all too guided (i.e., driven, *guidare*). That is, they are prefabricated and controlled, presenting packaged experiences. You see only what you are shown. Edgier punk rock tours may now be offered in some cities, but designing grime inoculates the senses. The idea of Experience Design (“UX” to tech companies) is something of an oxymoron. While there’s room to quibble over what constitutes an experience, the idea of mass-produced or pre-programmed experiences seems to dull the affectual resonance of sensory intake. As many definitions suggest, an experience is something you learn from. It is difficult to learn art history from a postcard or political economy from a placard.

To be a tourist is to contribute to the Xeroxing of a city. Snapping digital photos of the Eiffel Tower paralyzes the moment, debilitates the contingency. Yet we must do it. The Eiffel Tower’s function is to have its picture taken. If you don’t take a photo in front of the Eiffel Tower, you’re using the Tower incorrectly. It is compulsory. This cliché ennui devitalizes place and space, and literally drains life. Just as a copy of a copy of a copy corrodes the experience of an image, the trillions of photographs of the Eiffel Tower have erased all life from the icon. Indeed, it is nothing but an icon—a fetishized representation of a sentiment.

Today’s experience-designed cities are rapidly desecrated by the electric looking made possible by digital cameras. As Debra Shaw fears, there is a “drive to force cities, and the bodies that inhabit them, to correspond to their imaginary equivalents...it is probably not too much of a stretch to claim that cities become their imaginary equivalents” (445). The exponential growth in pictures taken of cities suffocates their capacity to awe. It is difficult to be charmed by a monument that’s been seen millions of times from every conceivable angle. It is sadly impossible for me to imagine *seeing* the Sphinx or Taj Mahal. You can’t see the Eiffel Tower through the accreted layers of representation in which it is shrouded.

When looking at the Eiffel Tower, we see the edifice through thousands of movies, TV shows, and Instagram filters. The Tower no longer exists in three-dimensional space, it is a hologram, a two-dimensional illusion compressed into a billion screens. The physical tower is now a representation of the icon, where signal and noise have inverted polarity. Diatribes against the corrosive capacities of social media are now almost as cliché as the Eiffel Tower, but it is worth remembering that the scrollscape that many of us inhabit erases the site specificity of an experience. Once a posed picture from the Eiffel Tower is posted, the representation usurps the spatiality of the memory.

“[U]rban space is experienced solely through the cartographies of tourism and consumption...popular tourist hotels now provide ‘selfie spots’ where tourists are able to locate themselves strategically in the frame with a notable landmark” (Shaw 445). The easy accusation here is that “[t]ourists are...not looking through the screen at the destination, but at the screen to see themselves” (Dinhopl & Gretzel 2016, 132), but the effect is to

create an infinity mirror that endlessly reflects itself. All that's left where the Eiffel Tower stands is a disembodied, dematerialized event horizon. Screen tourism unplugs the senses. Tourists become no-bodies.

Carbon Copies

Summarizing ideas from the City Beautiful movement of the late nineteenth century, Rob MacDonald writes that “[u]rban designers promoted the idea that city beautification could improve behavior, civic pride, political morals, property values, and business efficiency” (1990, 92). More immediately, today such beautification primarily attracts onlookers and makes locations Instagramable. If anything, the rising property values foment resentments among residents fatigued by excessive wealth pollution (Schwartz 2021).

On top of these aesthetic laments, there are the more tangible ecological repercussions of tourism (Zeppel 2015). The World Bank claims that there were 2.4 billion tourist arrivals in 2019 (up from 435 million in 1990). Nearly all this movement of bodies across wide distances is accomplished through burning fossil fuels, and hotels have notoriously outsized eco-footprints (Bagheri et al. 2020).

“Sustainable tourism” has been advocated “to prevent the inundation of urban tourist destinations by visitors in search of new experiences” (MacDonald 2000, 97). But there is no *sustainable* tourism, just as there is no sustainable colonialism. Barcelona wouldn't be more vital if its twelve million visitors arrived by sailboat and ate vegan. If people want a new experience, they won't get it walking La Rambla or Times Square—these places are all out of new experiences. However, the prerogative here is to encourage, not dismiss the urge for new sensations. It is deeply sanctimonious to suggest everyone should stop moving around the planet now, after rich Europeans spent the past 500 years going wherever they wanted. So, is there a better way, a non-colonial or non-Western way, to be somewhere else? To visit? To see something new?

While ecotourism and eco-hotels are on the rise, “the distinctions between ecotourism and mass tourism [are] negligible on a...global scale” (Stronza & Hunt 2012, 22). Eco-friendly options are often pricier (the commodification of responsibility) and more frequented by guilty and gilded Westerners, entrenching a colonial divide between those using the world “correctly” and those using the world irresponsibly. Ironically, for eighteenth-century colonizers, indigenous populations were irresponsibly under-exploiting their landscapes by not engaging in intensive agriculture, industrialization, and privatization. This irresponsible under-exploitation authorized the hegemony of European vision around the planet.

Morgan et al. highlight “hopeful tourism” as a means of transforming “our way of seeing, being, doing, and relating in tourism worlds and for the creation of a more equal and sustainable planet through action-oriented, participant-driven learnings and acts. In highlighting neglected ways of knowing, its advocates seek to disturb dominant approaches to tourism” (2018, 183). Laudable ambitions, but whether hopeful, sustainable, or eco, perhaps there is no “fixing” tourism, just as there is no “fixing” colonialism.

Voltaic Vacancy

Unlike a tour, a vacation is a break. It is an exit from normality, an exit from the monotonous and mundane. It can be refreshing; it can be enlightening. The word vacation stems from vacant and vacancy, which among other connotations means to be unoccupied (e.g., a hotel or apartment has vacancies). To be unoccupied is to not be laboring, to be unemployed. More critically, this can suggest not contributing to profit maximization or not being engaged in exploitation. More than a trip to Mexico City, a vacation is etymologically a rest, perhaps an escape from capitalism.

Of course, many vacations (especially in urban areas) are anything but a reprieve from capitalism. Visits to New York City can be hard work, leaving many exhausted as they attempt to see the whole city in four days, and such trips can easily cost thousands of dollars. Could taking a vacation be more like taking a nap? The vacationism explored herein attempts to be dreamy. It is more about releasing, emptying out, vacating. Vacationists can open up new aspects of cities. Instead of foreclosing cities with copious suffocating mechanical reproductions, vacationism reveals heretofore non-existent perspectives of urban centers.

The vacationist exercise below owes a debt to the Situationist movement of the 1950s and 60s, an avant-garde assemblage of political theorists and artists. The Situationists had deep roots in urban studies, growing out of experiments in psychogeography and the unitary urbanism movement, which advocated for a synthesis of art and infrastructure. The movement aimed to counteract the alienation of commercially saturated cities with impromptu spectacles (heretofore unexperienced experiences). “Psychogeography...was a mode of navigating the city intended to disrupt the imposed cognitive cartography of the worker under capital through creative meanders; to discover ‘a new city via a calculated drifting...’” (Shaw 2019, 447). A vacation should be a situation, a spectacle. A vacation should not be repeatable.

As an example of vacationism, rather than looking at the Statue of Liberty, one could “visit” a color, sound, or smell. A better way of seeing the Statue of Liberty could be to alter your vision such that the world is coated in the Statue’s iconic light green patina. The following steps demonstrate how this can be accomplished.

Step 1: Obtain a digital photograph of the Statue of Liberty. Open it in photo-editing software (PowerPoint is used here). Grab the color you want to experience.



Figure 1: Capturing Statue of Liberty's color in photo editing software (image by author).

Step 2: Have some translucent vellum paper printed up in the color and insert it into the lenses of your glasses.



Figure 2: Inserting 'Statue of Liberty-green' into lenses (image by author)

Step 3: *See* the world through the Statue of Liberty.



Figure 3: Comparison of regular world vs. vacationized world (image by author).

Equally, one could attempt to obtain the iconic smell of New York's street-cart honey roasted nuts (figure 4). A Covid mask could be coated in this intoxicating savory-sweet scent, allowing a vacationist to smell a crucial aspect of New York wherever they go. Any of New York's cacophonous sounds (e.g., jackhammers, honking cars, street buskers) could be recorded and played back on headphones, allowing the user to hear New York from anywhere. If one wanted to experience the different textures of New York, they could devise a system to blow hot grimy air on themselves, emulating a stroll over a subway

grate in the summer. There's a vacation in every pair of headphones, set of binoculars, microscope, or telescope. For those seeking "authentic" New York experiences, this may better fit the bill than going to a Broadway show.



Figure 4: Nuts 4 Nuts cart emanating blissful scent (photo by author).

City residents roll their eyes at tourists wandering through UX-designed urban renderings. Tourists don't know how to use the city correctly. They stand where they shouldn't, wear unfashionable clothes, and ask silly questions. Is there a better way to be somewhere you don't live? Vacationism proposes entering new places via counter-normative semio-chromatic (re)arrangements, less dominated by fossil-fueled neon indignities. This approach to visiting can be achieved remotely too, limiting the ecological strain of traveling and the indignity of airports.

When visiting Paris, it is fun to pretend we live there—nosh on a baguette and brie by the Seine, and play like we're Parisian. "For most people, tourism is...a chance to indulge" (Stronza & Hunt 2012, 22). This indulgence can have negative connotations, such as consuming to excess, but could also be an invitation to make-believe. Chants of "get real" or "be realistic" serve to entrench dominant (colonial) perspectives. As opposed to Mike Davis' "imagined urbanism" (2008), could future cities be modeled off of Mr. Rogers'

“Neighborhood of Make-Believe”? Rather than “imagineered urbanism offer[ing] monied elites a permanent exile in a pay-per-view utopia” (Shaw 2018, 446), could pretend arrondissements resemble a kind of Jubilee Day where oppressive ways of seeing are rearranged—paupers become princes, debts are forgiven, and polite society is suspended (Graeber & Wengrow 2021)? This is a vacation.

Iridescence

For much of the past 500 years of aesthetic study, color has been subservient to form. Among the geniuses that helped naturalize capitalist conceptions of space and time (e.g., John Locke and Immanuel Kant), color was considered secondary and superficial, whereas shape and form were primary. For Kant, color can be charming, but never beautiful (1978, 67). For early twentieth century thinkers attempting to unwire the naturalization of colonial thought, from Walter Benjamin to Wassily Kandinsky, “color is on the side of antiauthoritarian disruption and discontinuity, the radical leap of temporality that undermines smooth evolutionary progress” (Jay 2018, 25). For Charles Riley, color is “a dangerous anti-formal force that threatens the very fabric of...symmetry and organization” (1995, 274). Color enthusiast Josef Albers believed good color management could change the world (Blaszczyk 2014)!

Much of the contemporary vacation is coded visually, particularly in the form of generic portraits next to icons like the Sydney Opera House. The color of these pictures is oddly homogenous in its mixture of drab khaki, concrete grayscale, and the Crayola red of stop signs and Coca-Cola ads. Digital filters are used on many photography apps to enhance this splattered chromatic mediumism. In such mass-produced urban images, there is a clear emphasis on form over color. Indeed, when thinking of cities, it is most often their form (architecture) that comes to mind—the skyscrapers, the towers, the statues. It is more common to photograph Rome’s coliseum than Rome’s orange.

Are there other ways of perceiving urban color that might facilitate more robust vacationism? Echoing the sentiments of the *Der Blaue Reiter* art movement in the early 20th century, vacationism calls for the emancipation of color. Particularly, its emancipation from the tedium of compulsory digital photography. This rote imaging forecloses the visibility of cities. That is, despite the trillions of photographic representations of New York now floating in the clouds, the city is disappearing into its own representation. The signifier has swallowed the signified.

Serendipitously, particle physics has employed the phrase chromodynamics to describe key tenets of the Standard Model. Sub-protonic quarks are assigned one of three “colors.” By convention, these correlate with red, green, and blue, but this coding simply distinguishes between types of quark (they’re actually too small to have color). This “color” relates to charge (i.e., a positive or negative charge). Rather than the positive-negative binary though, there are three color charges for quarks with six total quark *flavors*: up, charm, top, down, strange, bottom. All of these flavors are post-ocular—they can’t be looked at. Yet they can be seen through the effect they have on larger particles. Likewise, eyes aren’t necessary to see New York; the city can be seen through its affect,

seen through its flavors.

The vacillating iridescence of the quark can be a template for how vacationism perceives and generates novel geographies. Just as the location and momentum of quantum phenomena only become determined in the co-constitutive process of observation, a city's geography depends on how you see it. While there are about 8 million different New Yorks today (one for every resident), there's no limit to the ways the city can be seen.

Every city has a color. All color needs light (there's no colors in the dark). Light needs air. You can't trap light in a room, you can't even trap it in a bulb, but you can trap it in a camera. Every city is a camera. And as such, every city is an optical illusion; is delusional. But what is a camera and what is a photograph. A camera is a room in Italy. A photograph is filled with light or empty.

(This paragraph was found while vacationing in Tangier in 2019.)

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