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<https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/09/29/the-landscapes-of-capital/print/>

The Landscapes of Capital

By John Steppling
9/28/2017



I don't live in the U.S. any longer. I did, for over forty years, but left for good almost twenty years ago. But I return, often, and I even returned and stayed for a year. I returned again this last week as an invitee of the Buffalo/Niagara Falls Film Festival (more on that below).

So, I wanted to talk about the America I found this time through. I changed planes in Washington D.C., at Dulles Airport (yes, named after cold war reactionary John Foster Dulles). I could not but think of that fascist loving arch elitist and racist as I sat there for an interminable few hours. I had a delayed connection to Buffalo. The first thing that strikes one, especially after having just left Gardermoen Airport, Oslo, and Copenhagen's Kastrup airport – both of which, along with Amsterdam's Schipol airport, are maybe among the easiest and least stressful to use in the world – is the noise and sense of agitation.

And what one notices right off, while still in Kastrup, is that the gate for the flight to Dulles is separate from the rest of the gates serving the international terminal. Flights to the U.S. have double the number of security personnel and are quite simply isolated. You are asked to submit to additional searches and are required to fill out additional forms — for what reason is anyone's guess since as far as I can determine none of the forms are actually used for anything. Anyway, that was OK, I had my triple espresso and chocolate. Kastrup must have even better food than Schiphol. Once on the plane I had a nice young Swede in the seat next to me, a student from Ingmar Bergman's birthplace island of Faro. The food was dreadful, of course. And I was struck, and this was to become a theme for this journey, with the insane and even delusional amount of packaging that is used. EVERYTHING is wrapped in plastic. In fact plastic spoons and forks are wrapped in plastic. Plastic wraps plastic wraps plastic. And inside is stale preservative and sugar laden food, designed for long shelf life, and which closely resembles and tastes like...plastic.

Landing means security. You must scan your own passport at Dulles. Why? I don't know, you have to go talk to a passport control officer anyway. Then if you have connecting flights you are funneled into another line, in a hot terminal annex, and scanned again. For me it was the third scan in 12 hours — and I had never left the airports. But then they ran out of plastic tubs and asked we just shove all our iPhones and what not into our carry on bags. And shove them all through the scanner. The young woman at the monitor wasn't looking at the screen as the bags passed so none of any of this mattered in the least. It was a strange dysfunctional bit of security kabuki.

Then more waiting. Only at Dulles you can't get good food. You can't get good coffee. You do get a lot of noise though. Gardermoen is tomb-like in comparison with American airports. But there is another aspect to this. It is true that those rather almost obscenely pleasant Scandinavian airports are servicing a very affluent clientele. U.S. air travel is too, really, only the U.S. today feels increasingly polarized. First class is separate. You actually never see them. They are in lounges provided by the airlines of choice. Business class seems to mean 21st century Wily Lomans. No, it is first class and the rest of us. And the rest are subjected to an increasing battery of security abuses. Take off your shoes? Why? Because one simpleminded patsy tried to ignite his Nikes? ONE GUY? That's it?? I saw old ladies have to, with some embarrassment, take off their shoes.

And then there is the increasingly visible racism of the U.S. I watched when black or Arab workers carried bags or moved carts. I saw so many of those put upon white faces tighten ever so slightly. The animosity is in the air. On the TVs, and there are TVs everywhere in the U.S., large screens EVERYWHERE. It is the only thing more common than cops. And on TV were endless photos of North Korea and the 'Rocket Man', or there were football games. One or the other.

Jesus but football is popular. And there is no other sport in the U.S. as saturated in jingoistic pro war rhetoric and symbolism. And I am reminded that this is a game proven to cause irreparable brain damage. That said, the, perhaps, hidden dialectic in this most militaristic of sports is the Kaepernick protests, which have spread. Sports always contains within it a kind of potential for such synthesis of contradiction (see Dave Zirin's recent writing). So mostly the comments one overheard were about football. Or about how fed up people were with that Kim Jung whatshisname...hell, get rid of that fucker. Trump speaking of "Nambia." An imaginary country that exists in that private colonial map in his mind. And then a group of young Christians sat down near me at the gate. They seemed to be focused on 'the holy spirit'. 'Oh man', one girl said, loudly, 'I felt the holy spirit today'. I could feel it all day, she said, rather too loudly. I looked at her. She was blonde, refried, maybe in her late twenties, and wore spandex pants and Reebok trainers and a blue t-shirt with some other athletic brand name scrawled across the front of it. She was loud. Oh and she kept eating M&Ms.

A family from maybe India or Bangladesh walked past. They were tired, and had young children. Holy Spirit's face darkened. She kept speaking on her phone but her voice lowered. The people I saw — those Americans — were all angry, just like the holy spirit girl. Nobody seemed happy. Nobody read.

I was reading ...Emmanuel Carrere's bio of Philip K. Dick (I'm Alive and You're Dead). A sort of perfect book for 7 hours spent at Dulles. I sat there as Carrere described Dick's interpretations of Master Eckhart's *idios kosmos*. Dick battled periods of extreme paranoia. A giant black face in the clouds that watched him. Eventually he simply stopped looking up. I knew the feeling. It was the Dulles domestic terminal. Suddenly everyone felt like an alien, a robotic imposter. A hologram.

Deplanning, as they say, in Buffalo, at midnight, is an odd and slightly unsettling experience. Walking down the long corridor to baggage claim I was reading the ads on the walls. One newer one advertised "Aesthetic Vaginal Surgery", with two Indian doctors in pastel shirts, gold watches, and oddly colored brown suits. Across from them was an ad for "Divorce Lawyer: Legal Assistance, effective and compassionate". The woman lawyer looked neither, but then looks can be deceiving. Many advertisements for sports, football or hockey.

I got to Niagara Falls late. I checked into the franchise hotel reserved for me. In the morning I had awful hotel eggs and toast. The waitress, a sort of late 40s version of the holy spirit girl, spoke in a Marlboro rasp, and asked THREE times did I want bacon or sausage. I said neither, three times. Just eggs. I was already suspect. Around me, without exception, were morbidly obese Americans. Two men wore their cowboy hats on inside while they ate. A younger guy had his hockey stick with him (in its case, mind you) and everyone ate from the all-you-can-eat buffet. It was very popular it seemed. Most of these people came for the Indian Casino (sic) down the block, next to the falls. It is a massive casino.

Everything is a franchise. And the food. Again the food. No wonder America is so miserable. Look at how they eat. It is truly appalling. Niagara Falls itself is a wonder, and yet surrounding it is the usual assortment of souvenir shops and fast food vendors. There was a "Daredevil

Museum”, but it had gone out of business. Too bad, I might have enjoyed that bit of American kitsch.

The tourist experience is one of absolute horror. I cannot find the words to describe just how spiritually nullifying the spectacle has become. Walk into those souvenir stores and very little is newly produced. All of it is, of course, made overseas. The faces of those working in these shops are portraits of depression. This is the white under class, the part time workers and long term unemployed. They smoke and they are angry. They are ‘right-on-the-edge’. They have crawled out on that psychic ledge and there is no more space and there is no going back. Nobody even pretends to give a shit. Buy a Niagara Falls t shirt, buy a genuine Native American maple syrup figurine, or fucking don’t. We don’t care.

Buffalo and Niagara Falls and Cattaraugus taken together is around a million people. The mean average income is half that of New York state overall. The house value is one fifth of New York overall. In other words if you own a home in Buffalo, you can’t give it away. Ancestral lineage is mostly German and Polish and Irish. There is a sizable Indian and south Asian community, and quite a few recent emigres from Africa. The average age is slightly younger than NYC. There were forty murders in Buffalo last year, down slightly from the previous two years. Rape was up slightly.

There is also the Niagara Falls Culinary Institute, which, judging from the photos out front turns out steam table chefs for the big hotels. Cheerios are manufactured here. Archer Midlands Daniels runs a huge flour factory and it is home to the National Buffalo Wings festival and competition.

Once upon a time, Buffalo was a reasonably rich city. And there remain a few of those great Queen Anne revival buildings that are often found in the major cities of the rust belt. The Richardson Olmstead Complex (architect Harry Hobson Richardson, who worked with famed landscape designer Frederik Olmstead, who created Central Park and Golden Gate Park) to create a still rather wonderful neo Romanesque brick and sandstone mental hospital built in 1862. Beyond that the city is dotted with old turn of the 20th century gilded age (well the first gilded age) houses, originally the grand homes of the leading industrialists of the time, or the homes of the managers of the factories of those industrialists. But that was all long ago. Buffalo is a microcosm. A micro-ecology, both psychologically and economically, and culturally for the entirety of the U.S.

Tourism is driven by notions no longer believed in; the idea of recreation and family vacations. Nobody can afford that. Leisure was always modeled after work. An extension of work. A kind of faux work time. Adorno wrote of leisure:

“According to the prevailing work ethic, time free of work should be utilized for the recreation of expended labor power.” For Adorno, the repetitive nature of alienated labor created a tendency to reproduce that repetitive boredom during times of leisure. And boredom, as he noted, was a sign of objective dullness. And that in turn linked to *“political apathy”*.

Tourism is for the Japanese and the Germans, today. Americans go to the casino. I stood in line at Starbucks, across from the casino, and a young American pair came in. She was maybe thirty but dressed twenty. Halter and cleavage and long tanned legs. Very aerobasized, and he was buffed with a tight t-shirt and baseball cap worn backwards. He was lean and athletic but he had that odd graceless gait of the gymnasium body. His face was handsome, chiseled and yet he looked terrified. Of what I do not know. His future or lack of it I suspect. And she radiated desperation. Both were anxious, nervous, and like the two pack a day souvenir vendors, they found themselves out on that ledge. So many white americans, working class, have taken on a kind of furtive look.

The backdrop of the Falls is pure allegory. The rising mist and the 20 bucks a pop boat rides (barely surviving one suspects) feel bereft of energy. Nobody seems to believe what is going on. The natural beauty of the Falls is now surrounded by massive tourist enterprises and commercialism.

In a society of mass surveillance, knowing that you are being watched makes you reasonable AND paranoid. A society in which all movements are infiltrated to an almost impossible to imagine degree, the real becomes a fluid concept. Are my emails monitored? Does it matter? In an age when police can and do manufacture evidence, what need is there for monitoring emails or phone conversations? They can just as easily, more easily, make them up.

Pilger wrote recently of his visits to the U.S. :

“Returning to the US, I am struck by the silence and the absence of an opposition – on the streets, in journalism and the arts, as if dissent once tolerated in the “mainstream” has regressed to a dissidence: a metaphoric underground. There is plenty of sound and fury at Trump the odious one, the “fascist”, but almost none at Trump the symptom and caricature of an enduring system of conquest and extremism.”

Pilger also noted....

“When Donald Trump addressed the United Nations on 19 September – a body established to spare humanity the “scourge of war” – he declared he was “ready, willing and able” to “totally destroy” North Korea and its 25 million people. His audience gasped, but Trump’s language was not unusual. His rival for the presidency, Hillary Clinton, had boasted she was prepared to “totally obliterate” Iran, a nation of more than 80 million people. This is the American Way; only the euphemisms are missing now.”

The problem with the fixation on Trump, which seems intentional on the part of corporate media, is that it trivializes the crimes of previous administrations. When walking around Niagara Falls and Buffalo I sense that almost all of my fellow citizens no longer believe what they hear, but they also are so terrified of voicing any dissent that they mostly nod in mute agreement. And this is partly about education. The default position for most Americans is one that has been shaped by Hollywood. And this week Rob Reiner announced the formation of something called *The Committee to Investigate Russia*, on whose board sit prominent neo cons and various reactionary commentators like Max Boot and Molly McKew (former advisor to Mikheil Saakashvili).

McKew is sort of the liberals answer to Nikki Haley. A sprung frothing fringe lunatic, in other words. Also David Frum, longstanding arch conservative and supporter, last election, of Hillary Clinton. The now well-known Morgan Freeman video was a piece of pure calculated propaganda. And this is why so many Americans feel it best to just keep silent. They haven't even the beginnings of basic knowledge on these topics to formulate an opinion. There has been a four decade program of keeping the populace uninformed. But Freeman's text sounds like a Hollywood movie, hell, he even uses screenplay metaphors, so in many places it will be very effective.

Cutting across this, however, are a couple other currents. One is the deeply entrenched and internalized racism of white America. Racism is like an encrusted psychic carbuncle on the collective soul of white culture. Having Morgan Freeman take the token torch from Colin Powell is perfectly predictable. Obama had already done it anyway. The racism of white America has learned to compartmentalize certain *special* black celebrities, often sports figures, while retaining a thoroughly white supremacist belief system.

Then there is the other deeply entrenched adoration of militarism. This month also saw the nakedly revisionist Ken Burns documentary on the Vietnam War. These are grotesque projects of disinformation. But if all you know of the world is what you glean from Hollywood, then most of this will seem quite reasonable and sincere. It is worth noting, too, that Snopes took issue with any criticism of the *Committee to Investigate Russia*. I digress, but its really well past time to stop referencing Snopes as an impartial observer of anything.

Buffalo is like much of the U.S. today. Unemployment is acute, as is poverty. Certain stats jump out at you, like 76% of disabled people live below the Poverty line in western New York state. Numbers mean nothing in unemployment, though, because the long term unemployed are simply not counted. All you have to do is walk around. There is an overriding sense of futility in American society, today. And one feels it in a visceral manner when returning here. The looks, the suspicion, the anger. Maybe it is because I live in Norway, but the sense of anger in America feels overwhelming. But so does the sense of smug entitlement.

On the long plane ride from Copenhagen to Washington D.C. I read, but took some time off to look at a few minutes from various films on offer. A remake of *Baywatch*, something or other with the insufferable Scarlett Johanson, and, well, it hardly matters because all of it is steeped in self congratulation. And it is all profoundly out of touch with American society. I often wish my remaining friends in the U.S. would just leave. I have certainly never regretted it. It is hard to really understand the ways in which privilege is expressed by mass culture when one lives inside it. The constant onslaught of propaganda, of this unreality, takes a toll, it seeps into your consciousness, it inhabits your grammar and speech and vision. The sound of U.S. society today is blatantly exceptionalist. WE are the best, the most special, unique, and the world follows our lead. People believe this. White America in particular seems to have collectively regressed. There are pockets, obviously, that are outside of this. But too few. And the cocoon of exceptionalism extends to travel, too. A vacation to some tourist resort means you haven't really left the U.S. There is a sense, really, of a schizophrenic state existing at large. A collective shrinking of basic emotions and feeling.

I met some very nice folks in Buffalo, of course. That is really not the point. Even nice (sic) people will feel they have to kill you if it's for your own good. Or their own good. Philip K. Dick spent his life fixated on the details of daily life being or seeming to be slightly out of order, slightly askew. He sensed unreality where everyone said reality. He knew the man behind the curtain only hid more curtains and more men. Dick was not a political thinker. His vision of western society was instinctual, anarchic, and personal. For him the personal was inextricably bound to the collective. He understood that fascism's first goal is to change the past. He knew the future was not the real goal, only the past. For the past would fortell the future. This is the insight of the paranoid schizophrenic.

"To understand the New Cold War emerging today, it is necessary to reexamine the original conflict between the United States and the USSR. The present Russia panic follows an entire century of fearmongering and "threat inflation," dating to the Russian Revolution, that has long served the interests of the U.S. military-industrial complex and security state. It has had little to do with either Russian or American realities, which have been consistently distorted."

— Jeremy Kurzarmov

It is ironic that the only actual cyber attack against a sovereign nation was one launched by the U.S. against Iran in 2008. Which fact is simply *not remembered* by media today. Instead the new security state is amping up rhetoric about Russia which they know is untrue. But what must be remembered here is firstly, the defense industry and U.S. military win even when they lose. Winning is not a hard fact. It is a loose concept. Sustaining budgets, or increasing them, is the first and only goal. And two, psychologically the ruling class is no less desperate and irrational and repressed than the underclass. It is only that Hollywood and corporate telecoms and places such as Clear Channel...that entire apparatus...they control message and they work very hard to reform the past.

Jim Mattis and RH McMaster, and Stanley McChrystal...the entire cabal of white male generals were likely moved in to surround Trump once his fundamental incompetence was made clear. They are militarists, and Mattis was the architect of Fallujah, and *earned* his nickname. Kelly and McMaster serve as guard dogs, and protectors of the Pentagon agenda. They seem cool, articulate, and the media adore them. Liberals fawn over them. Literally salivate and grovel in adoration. For the most pernicious and most indelible trope in contemporary America is that of military virtue and goodness. The square jawed buzz cut man of action. And in truth, compared to Trump and his family, they ARE efficient. Its just that efficiency almost certainly serves the metasticizing of western capital to all corners of the globe, and to the protection of US global interests.

If you want to know exactly how distracted from material reality most people are, ask a stranger directions somewhere. I can almost guarantee you will get wrong directions, or more likely still, get non directions. People have in general lost the capacity to organize their thoughts into sentences that convey specific material items or instructions. I had to find the theatre for this film festival. I chose to walk. A ten mile walk. Long but not crazy long. I like walking. But asking the man behind the counter at the hotel proved an exercise in futility. The walk was fine, hot, and as it turned out it took me directly through the shuttered refineries of Love Canal.

I started this journey to New York by having an airport hotel not make a wake up call. I missed the flight. The young man who *didn't* make the call had that deer in the headlights glazed look. He made little eye contact. In New York the slightly older young man simply had no words. He tried and finally printed out a Google map...which turned out to be wrong...but whatever. The point is that a majority of American citizens cannot tell you how to get from here to there. Literally, I mean *literally* they do not have a large enough vocabulary to explain directions nor to describe landmarks.

The screen addictions of contemporary western society is related to this degrading of vocabulary and speech. On this trip, besides plastic wrap, the most significant repeated image is that of people staring down at their smart phones. Walking, not walking, wherever, whatever time, most people are addictively punching out simplistic abbreviated messages. The amount of face time today is drastically reduced. I have read no study or any figures, but again, just go outside and walk around. And people have begun to speak as they text. In short non-grammatical half sentences. Texting is not really more than simple coded expressions for generic subject positions. Complex science cannot be texted, and there is no poetics associated with it. The rise, over very recent years, of emojis is another sign of how alienated the culture has become. This has been my experience in the U.S. And while its true in Europe too, it is not nearly true to the same degree.

Matt Taibbi in Rolling Stone wrote of Trump:

“Trump has not only completely lost his sense of humor, particularly about himself, but he’s a lingual mess. In his current dread of polysyllables – his favorite words include “I,” “Trump,” “very,” “money” and “China” – he makes George W. Bush sound like Vladimir Nabokov. On the page, transcripts of his speaking appearances often look like complete gibberish.

“When I did this now I said, I probably, maybe will confuse people, maybe I’ll expand that,” he said to Lester Holt in May, “you know, I’ll lengthen the time because it should be over with, in my opinion.” ...

He also can barely speak anymore, but without a close-up examination it’s impossible to say if this is a neurological problem or just being typically American. As the psychologist Michaelis puts it, one major cause for loss of cognitive function is giving up reading in favor of TV or the Internet, which is basically most people in this country these days.

The multiplicity theme applied to internet users (from mainstream popular theorists like Sherry Turkle) sees social media and texting and screen usage as mostly benign if not actually positive, an enhancement of human potential. This is sort of the TED level thinking that glossy magazines promote. But I would argue that the constant fractured and incomplete language of digital communication is both a reflection of and creator of a fractured and increasingly incoherent personality. People check their phones at funerals, at marriages, at almost any public event. But what occurs to me is that people’s compulsive smart phone usage might well continue even if they were only communicating with themselves. If you eliminated a destination for texting, the text-er would continue. That is the pathological aspect of screen usage. It feels like amphetamine driven rats hitting that lever for more drug. The idea, as some have put forward, that texting has

invented a new language that is actually very creative, etc etc etc, seems nonsense when you wander the streets or malls of America.

There are no more depressing places on earth, I don't think, than suburban America. Synonymous with White America. This is the revenge of white flight on itself. Turkle is correct, however, when she raises the fear that haunts the societies of the West today; the fear that 'nobody is listening'.

There is another aspect here, and that is that screen life, social media, in all of its formats, allows people to create an image by way of deletion and editing. It is, in a sense, a way to edit the past as well as the present. It is hard not to see the drop in literacy in the U.S. and certainly there are ample examples of misspeaking in the political class. Maxine Waters confusing Crimea with Korea (and then having the facts wrong anyway) or Bush thinking Africa was a country, or the dozen or so Trump errors. Geography is not taught in schools today. As I say, ask for directions.

In the hotel in which I stayed, in the breakfast area, which serves also as a bar in the evening, there are SEVEN wide screen TVs on the walls. On one wall they are only a foot or so apart. During non sporting hours they are tuned to news channels. The sound is off, but that is no problem as there is close captioned sub titles at the bottom, as well as a constant scroll of news items. The hotel guests are then bombarded during all meals with a constant sound bite onslaught.

A recent Zogby poll had 52% of Americans in favor of a preemptive strike against North Korea. Propaganda works best when it is delivered in sound bites. And when all you can understand is sound bites, you will eventually internalize purely authoritarian and fascist values.

I wrote a while back on Italian cinema after WW2 and its relation to fascism. The anti fascist strategies, aesthetically and politically, of directors such as Pasolini, Bertolucci, and Antonioni. And I wrote this...

In Italian cinema, after WW2, there were debates around the question of post synching the sound track. Elias Chaluja suggested that post-synchronization was an expression of the dominant class, of its ideology and a way to distance identification, but more, to 'conquer the screen'. Remember that Pasolini, Bertolucci, Antonioni and a dozen others had signed the Amalfi Manifesto in 1968, protesting government censorship, and monopoly control of distribution, but also the laws concerning post synchronization. Antonioni perhaps above all other film directors, radically reversed trends in how to score films. His films create sound-scapes, for lack of a better word. He, like Pasolini, under duress, fashioned new ways to dub and post synch their films. Which suited both their sensibilities. The anti fascism of both instinctively rejected music cues for narratives. They were out to liberate the screen, not to conquer it.

Screen life is now fully conquered, as it were. And it need not be so. If digital screen technology contains any inherent addictive qualities, they could certainly be minimized if they did not exist and develop within an utterly coercive and manipulative exploitive framework. Screen addiction is Capitalist screen addiction. Aesthetic liberation is just as crucial to today's somnambulant population as is economic liberation. Cultural liberation in other words. The soundtrack to daily

life is a very specific tone of voice that is heard across all news outlets and entertainment channels. The voice of the generic talking head as he or she mouth platitudes and empty repetitive clichés in cadences that never vary. It is an endless loop and long ago the content of what is being said became irrelevant. It is ‘that’ sound. And to awaken from it means to first turn it off.

The festival itself was poorly attended. They had moved it to a new venue. There was an Afghan vet injured in the war, now legless, who came in a wheelchair. A nice fellow. He joined us at dinner. The discussion turned to Vietnam and I sensed growing tension around the table — especially with the guy who orchestrates the festival. We were all at a bizarre neo-Chinese buffet restaurant (the walls painted a curious flamingo pink, but never mind). I changed the subject. Everyone involved were vets. There is that knee jerk patriotic trope that white Americans can’t escape it seems. In most of the U.S., the military remains sacrosanct. No matter what.

I met three students, all black. And each of them sensed the need for dramatic change in the way the U.S. is run. If anything like socialism is to happen, these young men (all were male and all attended local colleges) will drive that movement. They also desperately wanted to know more, about everything. They hung around after my lecture and we talked for quite a while. They also are eager to leave Buffalo — shock I know. But their curiosity, and desire for social justice, and for a sense of culture, was genuine and substantial. It is how revolutions slowly begin to form. They asked for reading lists, too. It made the entire five days worth the effort.