INSTEAD OF
THE GRAND TOUR
Travel Replacements
in the Nineteenth Century

Dietrich Neumann

Barker’s First Rotunda on Leicester Square
where he showed his paintings of London
and Spithead, 1793. © The Trustees of the
British Museum.
In his book *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926), French Surrealist Louis Aragon recalled that his friend Paul Valéry once described to him an agency in the old Passage de l’Opéra in Paris "which accepted unstamped letters and arranged to have them posted from any desired point of the globe to the address written on the envelope, a facility that would allow the customer to feign a voyage to the Far East, for example, without moving an inch from the far west of some secret adventure."

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the location of the Passage de l’Opéra, which in 1925 was about to be demolished to make way for the eastern extension of the Boulevard Haussmann, was only a short walk from the Passage des Panoramas, in which three of the earliest panorama buildings in Paris flourished from 1802 until 1831. The panoramas fulfilled a purpose not unrelated to that of the agency in the Passage de l’Opéra: their visitors found themselves temporarily transported to a distant part of the globe without having to leave the safety of Paris, and without spending considerable time or money. When the Passage de l’Opéra opened in 1823, the panoramas nearby were showing views of Athens and Constantinople. The German architect Jakob Ignaz Hittorf wrote about the astonishing realism of these views: "Those who were lucky enough to have visited these famous cities believed they had never left them, and those who had not had the pleasure, thought they had been transported there."

After its debut in London in 1793, the idea of the panorama building, a structure with a continuous, 360-degree painting on the inside of a cylindrical room, arrived in Paris with the help of the American inventor Robert Fulton, who later contributed significantly to people’s ability to actually, physically, travel with the invention of the steam engine. Fulton had purchased the patent for the panorama building from the British inventor Robert Barker, and he commissioned several panoramas in Paris before selling out to a theater impresario.

The passion for travel that emerged in the nineteenth century was accompanied by the development of elaborate mechanisms for travel replacement at home, and in the process changed architecture’s role and potential. Throughout the nineteenth century, countless panorama buildings existed in cities all over the world, in particular in Europe, the United States, and Japan, as perhaps the most significant form of visual mass entertainment and education. While in the first half of the century the subject matter of the giant paintings inside mostly concentrated on the depiction of faraway lands and bird’s eye views, in later decades the panoramas’ purpose changed to political and religious instruction through the depiction of battle scenes and biblical imagery.

All panorama buildings had a similar spatial configuration. A visitor entered through a dark tunnel and emerged via a spiral staircase in the center of a circular balcony. Beyond this lay a continuous landscape in the round, lit ingeniously from above through skylights shielded from the viewer by a circular roof. Robert Barker coined the term “panorama” (meaning “see everything”) for his invention, but it was actually not this quality that most fascinated the visitors. After all, seeing 360 degrees of one’s environment was not an unusual experience. What made the encounter with the continuous...
panoramic painting so crucially different was the sudden, highly convincing passage into another world. As Charles Robert Leslie wrote in 1812, "I actually put on my hat imagining myself to be in the open air." Many of the subjects of early panorama paintings were, in fact, the cities that travelers visited on their Grand Tours: Rome, Naples, Athens, and Constantinople.

Countless contemporary reports took delight in favorably comparing a visit to a panorama to the effort of actually traveling to a faraway destination, thus privileging the experience of artifice over that of reality. An article in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1824 developed this idea quite succinctly:

If we have not the waters of the Lake of Geneva, and the bricks and mortar of the little Greek town, tangible by our hands, we have them tangible by the eye—the fullest impression that could be purchased, by our being parched, passported, plundered, starved, and stenched for 1200 miles east and by south, could not be fuller than the work of Messrs. Parker's and Burford's brushes. The scene is absolutely alive, vivid, and true, we feel all but the breeze, and hear all but the dashing of the wave.

A generation later, the critics' enthusiasm had not waned. A London writer noted on December 27, 1861: "There are aspects of soil and climate which...in great panoramas such as those of Mr. Burford, are conveyed to the mind with a completeness and truthfulness not always gained from a visit to the scene itself." And the *Art Journal* agreed that the view to be had of Naples in the panorama in Leicester Square was "even more pleasant to look upon in Leicester Square, than is the reality with all its abominations of tyranny, licentiousness, poverty and dirt."

Apart from views of distant lands, early panoramas often showed bird's eye views of an urban center, produced for and shown in the same city. Visitors delighted in pointing out familiar landmarks to each other and in understanding the expanse and overall form of their city. One of the earliest Parisian panorama buildings in the Jardin des Capucines showed a view of Paris from the Tuileries in 1799, and, in London, Robert Barker showed the city from the roof of the Albion Mills. Such bird's eye views anticipated the view from a tall tower, or replaced the view from a hot air balloon, which was a pleasure (and danger) only very few people ever had a chance to experience. The Eiffel Tower in Paris finally fulfilled the role that the bird's eye views had prepared their visitors for, at least in the eyes of Roland Barthes, who observed:

...architecture is always dream and function, expression of a utopia and instrument of a convenience. Even before the Tower's birth, the nineteenth century (especially in America and in England) had often dreamed of structures whose height would be astonishing, for the century was given to technological feats, and the conquest of the sky once again preyed upon humanity...the bird's eye view, on the contrary, represented by our romantic writers as if they had anticipated both the construction of the tower and the birth of aviation, permits us to transcend sensation and to see things in their structure...What, in fact, is a panorama? An image we attempt to decipher, in which we try to recognize known sites, to identify landmarks...to perceive Paris from above is infallibly to imagine a history; from the top of the tower, the mind finds itself dreaming of the mutation of the landscape which it has before its eyes; through the
Franz in the Rue St. Honoré, and others followed in the Rue René Boulanger, the Rue du Château d’Eau, the Place d’Austerlitz, and the Rue de Berri. At any time during the nineteenth century, a Parisian flâneur (and his counterparts in London, Berlin, or New York) would have found several panorama buildings competing for his attention and offering, as it were, so many portals punctuating an imaginary map of the city, leading to worlds whose expansive spaces reached far beyond their buildings’ actual size and location.

Contemporary descriptions of panoramas usually emphasized the breathtaking realism and verisimilitude of the large, continuous paintings rather than pointing out the shortcomings of the medium. After all, panoramas offered only a purely visual similarity; they lacked the ability to stimulate any of the other senses. Looking out over Cairo, one did not feel the heat of the Mediterranean sun or the dust-filled desert winds, nor hear the noise of camels trotting by or smell the food vendors at the base of the pyramids. And, of course, nothing in this scenery moved. The light did not change, and animals and humans were frozen in their tracks. But the panorama was still vastly superior to all other forms of imagery from exotic places that reached the interested public, such as black-and-white photography, engravings, and lithographs. Panorama paintings were much larger and they surrounded the viewer with their spatial, almost three-dimensional appearance, enhanced by the realistic middle ground between the viewer and the canvas, which usually provided a transition from three-dimensional objects in the foreground to the twodimensional surface of the painting.

Few panoramas have survived unchanged to this day. In the United States, the Gettysburg Panorama in Atlanta has been seriously modified in order to cater to the expectations of a post-cinematic audience. Rows of seats are arranged on a turntable in the center of the circular room. The platform slowly rotates around its central axis, accompanied by taped explanations. The cinematic experience has intruded on its predecessor: ceci n’est pas une photo. Other surviving nineteenth-century panoramas can be found in Sainte-Anne-du-Beauport, Quebec; Altötting, Germany; Innsbruck, Austria; Thun and Lucerne, Switzerland; and Prague, Czech Republic. Perhaps the most astonishing is the Mesdag Panorama (1881) in Scheveningen, a suburb of The Hague, Netherlands. Its creator, the then-famous painter of maritime scenes Hendrik Willem Mesdag, decided, contrary to all convention, to depict a spot very close to the actual location of the panorama—the beach at Scheveningen. At first glance, the scene could not replace travel in time or space, as other panoramas promised. But it offered something entirely different, and perhaps more lasting: by showing the view of the city from a spot on the beach that any city dweller could visit, Mesdag made visitors aware of the beauty of this particular place, which was threatened (and ultimately destroyed) by overeager development. At the same time, Mesdag demonstrated the visual and emotional power resulting from the transformation of a real scene into a work of art, suggesting, as the French architectural theorist Quatremère de Quincy remarked about panoramas in 1812, that “the world seemed to belong solely to the language of painting.”

Astonishment of space, it plunges into the mystery of time, lets itself be affected by a kind of spontaneous anamnesis; it is duration itself which becomes panoramic. Even after the two panoramas in the Passage des Panoramas closed in 1831, an imaginary visitor to the above-mentioned agency would have been able to walk to one of numerous panorama buildings that existed in Paris throughout the nineteenth century. In that same year, the painter Charles Langlois opened a large panorama establishment near the Place de la République, and, after considerable success, commissioned the architect Jakob Ignaz Hittorf to build an even larger panorama at the Champs-Élysées in 1839. Its size—40 meters in diameter—soon became the industry standard. Hittorf’s structural masterpiece (boasting an early suspension roof) opened with a painting of the 1812 “Fire of Moscow.” In 1886, Charles Garnier built his Panorama
Famously, the young Vincent van Gogh visited the Mesdag Panorama in 1881 and found, as he told his brother, that "it is a work that deserves all respect... its only fault is that it has no fault.""

Back to our visitor in the Passage de l'Opera, who, in search of a means of travel replacement, could also walk to one of the postcard sellers who, at some point in the nineteenth century, settled in the Passage des Panoramas and its continuation the Passage Jouffroy, and are still there today. There he might acquire a stereoscope and a few stereographs (pairs of black and white photographs that provided a three-dimensional view when seen through the stereoscope) and do what Oliver Wendell Holmes described in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1859: "I creep over the vast features of Rameses, on the face of his rockhewn Nubian temple; scale the huge mountain-crystal that calls itself the Pyramid of Cheops. I pace the length of three Titanic stones of the wall of Baalbec, mightiest masses of quarried rock that man has lifted into the air... I stroll through Rhenish vineyards, I sit under Roman arches, I walk the streets of once-buried cities, I look into the chasms of Alpine glaciers, and on the rush of wasteful cataracts. I pass, in a moment, from the banks of the Charles to the ford of the Jordan, and leave my outward frame in the arm-chair at my table, while in spirit I am looking down upon Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives."'

Like the panorama, and in striking contrast to the perception of contemporary commentators, the medium of the stereograph creates conditions markedly different from being in a particular location in person. Rosalind Krauss compared the view into the stereoscope with the experience of being in a cinema: "Both involve the isolation of the viewer with an image from which surrounding interference is masked out. In both, the image transports the viewer optically, while his body remains immobile. In both, the pleasure derives from the experience of the simulacrum: the appearance of reality from which any testing of the real-effect by actually, physically, moving through the scene is denied. And, in both, the real-effect of the simulacrum is heightened by a temporal dilation."'

Film, of course, joined the media of the panorama and diorama shortly before the turn of the century and eventually replaced them entirely. Countless panorama buildings were taken down in the early years of the twentieth century to make room for movie theaters, signaling an astonishing shift in public viewing habits. Despite an abundance of shortcomings, the flickering, black-and-white moving image on a small bright rectangle, usually encountered in a noisy, smoke filled room, itself silent and fleeting, the length of its scenes determined by the director, was immediately more successful than the meticulously painted, colorful panorama that provided complete spatial immersion and could be viewed as long as one's heart desired. Was it the occasional movement of the camera that suggested the possibility of travel to the viewers, was it the potential for narrative that turned this new medium, inferior as it was in many respects to its predecessor, into the quintessential art form of modernity?

The beginnings of cinema were also to be found in close proximity to the Passage de l'Opera. A short walk led to the basement room of the Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capucines, where, on December 28, 1895, the Lumière brothers showed the world's first projected movie to a paying audience. Their father had seen Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope in 1894 and described it to his sons, who developed a projection apparatus to accompany it. Soon, both Edison and the Lumière brothers were sending licensed cameramen to exotic locations all over the world. Georges Méliès, the great pioneer of fantastic cinema, soon joined in their enormous success. From his office in the Passage de l'Opera, he created films that transported his viewers into a different, magic realm in which the continuity of time and space was never certain.

In 1822, Quatremère de Quincy had already remarked that it was in fact the art of architecture that made the panorama possible. Indeed, architecture was complicit in the miraculous explosion of space that those willing to observe it experienced. The virtual space represented in panoramas far exceeded the limited actual space inside the rotunda. Architecture thus became the most accomplished tool for travel replacement.
It is no coincidence that during the rise and widespread public success of the panorama, the phenomenon of historicism emerged in Western architecture, only to fade slowly when cinema arrived on the scene. Throughout the nineteenth century, and in particular in its second half, coinciding with an intense revival of panoramic viewing, public and private buildings created fully immersive environments which suggested that the visitor had been transported in time or space.

Neo-Gothic churches offered a medieval environment and a return to the time before Luther and Henry VIII, when Christianity was still, supposedly, peacefully unified. Neo-Renaissance palaces endowed their users and inhabitants with a transformation to the splendors of Italy and wealth and power of the Medici; Ludwig II, king of Bavaria, used the tropical garden with its Oriental architecture in the greenhouse atop the royal palace in Munich as a realm for his escapist dreams. Neo-Gothic churches offered a medieval environment and a return to the time before Luther and Henry VIII, when Christianity was still, supposedly, peacefully unified. Neo-Renaissance palaces endowed their users and inhabitants with a transformation to the splendors of Italy and wealth and power of the Medici; Ludwig II, king of Bavaria, used the tropical garden with its Oriental architecture in the greenhouse atop the royal palace in Munich as a realm for his escapist dreams.

World's fairs often housed spectacular panoramas but also provided three-dimensional, open-air environments that convincingly transported the viewer into, for example, an "Oriental" street. At the Paris Exposition in 1889, the Rue du Caire, which was admired greatly by contemporary visitors for its realism and exactitude, consisted of buildings that had been demolished in Cairo to make room for a Haussmann-inspired boulevard. Kurt Forster has pointed out how Berlin's city planning under Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Germany's most important nineteenth-century architect and a former panorama painter, shifted toward an emphasis on viewpoints, visual connections, and overviews that suggested meaningful relationships among buildings through space, a predecessor of CinemaScope. As Louis Aragon makes clear in his description of the Passage de l'Opera, even spaces that were not historicist, but were decidedly utilitarian and free from references to other places or times, could turn into heterotopian spaces worthy of panoramic travel, if they were left alone long enough. The first chapter of Le Paysan de Paris of 1926 presents the passage as a place belonging to a different moment in time, bypassed by progress and modernity, an aquarium of relics of a past epoch. Walter Benjamin confessed to his friend Theodor Adorno in 1935 that reading this chapter made such an impression on him that "I could never read more than two or three pages of this on going to bed, because my heart began beating so fast that I had to put it aside." It was de Maistre claimed humorously, "the new mode of traveling I introduce to the world." He pointed out to his readers that his journey had cost him nothing, that any traveler on this road would not need to fear "bleak winds or change of weather," and he assured the "cowards" that "they will be safe from pitfalls or quagmires." The book was such a success that de Maistre published a sequel about a journey in his room at night in 1825.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the interior assumed an important role in the discourse on travel and the panoramic experience. In his 1935 essay "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," Walter Benjamin included short sections on the arcade, the panorama, and the interior. After the revolution, he argued, the role of the interior had changed and had become not unlike that of the panorama: "The private individual, who in the office has to deal with reality, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions." Benjamin excluded both commercial and social considerations from the interior. "From this arise the phantasmagorias of the interior—which, for the private man, represents the universe. In the interior, he brings together the far away and the long ago. His living room is a box in the theater of the world." Much to Benjamin's chagrin, the young philosopher Dolf Sternberger adopted the concept of the panorama from Benjamin's essay and used it as a metaphor to access the complex social history of the
nineteenth century. A long subsection of his 1938 book Panorama: Views of the Nineteenth Century treats the interior as a panoramic space, shut off from the world outside. Its screened-off windows and its “horror vacui” that had washed up countless pieces of art, gave access to the “inner Orient” of the inhabitants.19 Shortly afterward, German philosopher Ernst Bloch picked up the thread of Benjamin and Sternberger’s observations when he included an important chapter on the “Distance wish and historicizing room in the nineteenth century” in his seminal work The Principle of Hope, written while he was in exile in the United States between 1938 and 1947, and published after his return to Germany in the 1950s. Bloch wrote that the interior changed in the second half of the nineteenth century:

A bourgeoisie that was becoming rich lay down in the bed of nobility, dreamed there after past styles, old-German, French, Italian, Oriental, pure souvenir. A constantly astonishing desire emerged to transform even No-Being into Appearing, to have their everyday apartment sailing under different colors. Travel substitute, indeed outdoing travel between their own four walls became the password, partly a historical, partly an exotic one.20

It is with a certain disappointment that Bloch notes how modern architecture has apparently relinquished its power to provide transfer to different lands, moods, and our “inner Orient.” Instead of offering a travel replacement, “these days houses in many places look as if they are ready to leave. Although they are unadorned or for this very reason, they express departure. On the inside they are bright and bare like sick rooms, on the outside they seem like boxes on movable rods, but also like ships.”21

Ceci tuer a cela
The panorama existed as a prominent popular art form for roughly one hundred years before it was replaced by the cinema, which, through the novelty of movement, crosscutting, and close-ups offered a faster and more appealing version of travel replacement. At the same time, architecture, the extension of the panorama, gave up on its power to convincingly transport its inhabitants into other worlds. Now, one hundred years after the invention of film, the institution of cinema is challenged by a new proliferation of moving imagery, and by a profound redefinition of the medium of film through digital technology.

Today, films can easily be made and distributed by anyone, thanks to cheap video cameras and editing software. The experience of viewing moving imagery has long left the darkened cinema and has conquered the urban environment and created new fully immersive illusionary environments. The availability of bright LED lights has brought about urban screens which are no longer dependent on darkness. Critics have begun to ask about the impact of the urban screen on the experience of the city. “After the age of architecture-sculpture we are now in the time of cinematographic factitiousness... From now on architecture is only a movie...The city is no longer a theater (agora, forum) but the cinema of city lights,” Paul Virilio wrote in 1991.22 Boston Globe architecture critic Robert Campbell echoed his concerns in 2006: “Now, the entire facade of a building, from sidewalk to roof, may be a digital screen that flashes ever-changing images. Is it a billboard? Is it architecture? Is it art? Who can say? Is this the world we’re headed for? Will we even know anymore when we’re in the real world and when we’re in a media simulation? Will that cease to be a meaningful distinction?”23

Can it be a coincidence that just at this important moment, the old panoramic technique is being rediscovered? In Dresden and Leipzig, former gas tanks now house very successful new painted panoramas of Baroque Dresden and Ancient Rome. At the same time, 360-degree digital panoramic photography has become highly popular and is fundamentally changing the way we record and reach buildings and their urban context. And architecture itself, accepting some help from new technologies, is rediscovering its ability to move, transport, and transform us.

1. Louis Aragon, Paris Prosent (Boston: Exact Change, 1994), 21. The first chapter of Le Paysan de Paris, from which this quote comes, was entitled “The Passage de l’Opera” and had appeared in four installments between June and September 1924 in the Revue Europeenne.
2. Bernard Comment, Das Panorama (Berlin: Nicolai, 2000), 46.
4. C.R. Leslie to Thomas J. Leslie (February 21, 1812), as quoted Hyde, Panoramanial!, 28.
6. London Times (December, 1861), as quoted in Hyde, Panoramanial!, 38.
7. Art Journal 7 (1861), 319; as quoted in Hyde, Panoramanial!, 38.
9. For a list of existing panoramas see Rombout, ed., The Panorama Phenomenon.