Non-Travel: the role of design in the experience of contemporary travel

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Purpose of the Study

Over the last ten years, the proliferation of online media, digital applications as well as wi-fi hotspots has undoubtedly had a profound impact on the accessibility of information and tools available to travelers. The shift from analogue to digital also allows us to see the way in which these devices are changing our overall experience of travel, providing the ability to simultaneously plan, experience and share the places that we visit physically. But the way in which we define travel cannot be constrained to the physical; it should also encompass the movements of our mind. The focus of this research is on the images, objects and tools that we use to experience travel without being physically present in the place we are visiting, or what I term “non-travel.”

I argue that non-travel is elicited through “devices”—the physical and digital tools that are involved in travel itself. They embody the experience of a place even if they are not involved in our physical presence in the place. The success of the device is partly due to how much we feel we have been transported to the place as opposed to seeing the place through the given medium. As digital technologies have become more advanced, the depiction of space has become more three dimensional, engaging all our senses. Through these new technologies, advanced forms of narrative emerge, using the myth of travel to elicit an experience of non-travel.

The role of technology, and specifically the effect of VR and social media on travel, form a major part of tourism studies today. Other themes that I explore, such as the flâneur, “non-places,” and photography, are areas of study in their own right. However, the approach from which I will be addressing these ideas, at the intersection of design and travel, is new, and ripe with potential. My goal is to arrive at a definition of non-travel, which will allow us to better understand and talk about the contemporary experience of travel. Through this process, I also hope to answer the following questions: Are contemporary devices creating a new experience of travel? What is the extent of design’s role in the myth-making of travel? What does it mean to “non-travel”? What turns a non-traveler into a traveler?

Literature Review

In order to understand the role of contemporary devices within the experience of travel, I touch upon the following areas of scholarship in my literature review: definitions of travel in tourism studies; the tourist as flâneur; globalization and the commodification of tourism; the image of travel, myth-making, and narrative transportation; the authenticity of travel, experience design, and (tele)presence.

Excerpt: The Myth of Travel

The experience we have of a place is a combination of what we see, read and hear about a city, and the individual filter through which we see it (the ideas, skills, desires, and expectations framed by social class, gender, nationality, age and education), which create what John Urry calls “the tourist gaze.” (Urry and Larsen, 2011: 2) Through this gaze, tourists consume images and objects as well as signs, becoming “amateur semioticians.” (Barthes, 1972) The experience we have of a city is shaped by the “word, image and myth” that is built around that city. The objects of a city that relate to our experience of travel work within a system that create the myth of travel. How
much we believe the myth directly influences how much we feel like we are traveling, or in this case non-traveling.

In Dean MacCannell’s chapter on *Sightseeing and Social Structure*, he defines a tourist attraction as a relationship between a tourist, a sight and a marker. (Roberson, 2001: 15) The marker is a piece of information about a sight, which can come in the form of a guidebook, informational tablet or souvenir. Without the marker, the sight would be indistinguishable from the everyday around it. Markers can also suggest a sight is more “extraordinary” than it would otherwise appear. (Urry and Larsen, 2011: 16)

“Tourist desire is not initially hooked by the reality of tourist destinations, but by symbols associated with destinations.” (MacCannell, 2011: 60)

These symbols, or markers, are what create the desire to travel to a city but they also initiate our own “anticipatory travel.” (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 207-226) We create a picture in our mind of where we are planning to go and what it will feel like to be there based on what we have read or seen and our previous experiences of other places.

“For every trip actually taken, millions are imagined.” (MacCannell, 2011: 64)

Images, in the form of photographs, adverts and brochures, play an important role in this anticipatory travel; they are the “starting point of tourist destination.” (Crouch et al, 2005: 7) Barthes suggests that it is the “ontological realism” of the photograph literally transports the individual back to “being there,” activating an imaginative journey. (Urry and Larsen, 2011: 168) It is these modes of anticipatory and imaginative journeys that form the basic features of non-travel, but how are these journeys created within the system of the myth of travel?

The “tourist imagination” has been widely studied for its role in how we move between the physical experience of travel and the media that portrays it. (Crouch et al, 2005: 2) In order to understand the significance of design in crossing this boundary between the physical and the virtual, it is useful to also understand de Certeau’s “space narratives” (the narratives that traverse, organize and create places) so that we can go on to study contemporary travel imagery. (Augé, 2008, 68) These narratives are formed using the words, images and myths that form a place, and are what initiates the journey, taking us away from the media itself to the place we create in our imagination.

**Research Design**

In order to understand what is involved in non-travel, this paper looks at how we perceive and enact travel today through analysis of the images and objects that we actively engage with, and which encourage or facilitate us to travel, whether that be physically, imaginatively or a mixture of both. The devices that elicit non-travel, can be loosely categorized into three typologies: *editorial* - magazines, editorials and advertising that convey the image of travel; *physical* travel tools or objects - the items that help us become a *traveler*; and interaction with *digital* technologies, which allows us to see and engage with a place remotely.

The case-studies I explore offer examples of each of these typologies, including: *Surface* (a design magazine that has recently shifted its focus from fashion to travel), travel-specific *Instagram* feeds, *MUJI to Go* (travel paraphernalia aimed at the design conscious) and VR experiences, for example *Marriott Hotel’s* “VRoom Service” and “Teleporter.” While they do not provide a complete study
of all the non-travel devices available, they serve as stimuli with which to study and test the concept of non-travel.

Because of the nature and variety of non-travel devices, the method of data collection and qualitative analysis has been tailored to each. Nevertheless, each have involved three common elements: desk research using printed and online literature and studying secondary sources; pointed interviews to understand the experience of users (ranging from frequent fliers to armchair travelers and staycationists), design and business decisions (of product designers and owners of travel companies) and background information on the travel industry (from travel journalists, bloggers and influencers); as well as first-hand analysis of designed objects, their physical, visual and digital elements, and a study of their context.

A series of different lenses, which have developed through my research to date, will be applied in this analysis in order to understand how these devices contribute to the conceptualization of non-travel. On a functional level these include how they create a travel narrative and leverage a travel community, their role as a marketing tool, and their use of technology. On a more theoretical level, I will look at their role in the design, image, myth, and authenticity of travel.

**Expected Outcomes**

This research will be submitted in May 2016 as a 7,500 word thesis with the following structure. It will form part of a larger portfolio of work, including an 8 minute podcast and book proposal for a travel guide to non-travel.

1. An introduction to the concept of non-travel outlining the research area and methods used.

2. A brief history of travel, potential non-travel devices, and the various characters of travel in order to define “travel(er)” in the context of this study.

3. Where Are We Going? will look at how the myth of travel is designed through images and narratives, in both advertising and anticipatory travel as it relates to non-travel; the focus will be on Instagram, and how we experience travel through others.

4. What Should We Pack? will consider the image of the traveler and how physical objects, such as the passport or MUJI products, allow us to play the part of the traveler.

5. “Being There” will focus on ideas of experience, authenticity, and presence as they relate to VR and travel, and whether it is indeed possible to take a virtual holiday in the digital age.

6. A synthesis of ideas, definition of non-travel and its applications in travel and design today.
References


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